

Kingdom Hearts II: The Novel, Vol. 2

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Shiro Amano**

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Disney SQUARE ENIX

KINGDOM HEARTS

THE NOVEL



2

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ORIGINAL CONCEPT: TETSUYA NOMURA
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ILLUSTRATION BY: SHIRO AMANO

Disney | SQUARE ENIX

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Disney SQUARE ENIX



Vol. 2



Tomoco Kanemaki

Original Concept

Tetsuya Nomura

Kazushige Nojima

Illustrations

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NEW YORK

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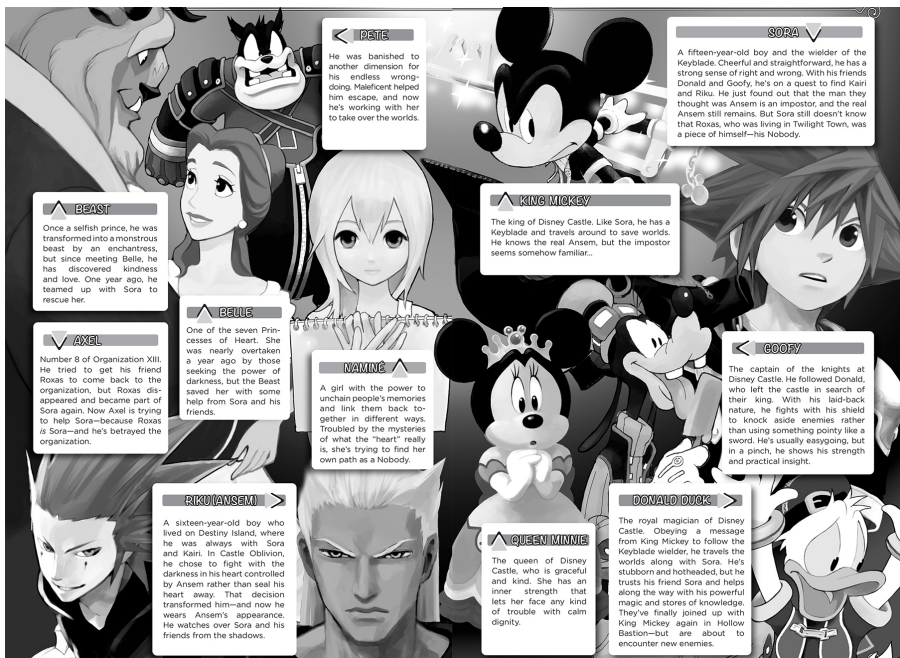
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BEAST

Once a selfish prince, he was transformed into a monstrous beast by an enchantress, but since meeting Belle, he has discovered kindness and love. One year ago, he teamed up with Sora to rescue her.

AXEL

Number 8 of Organization XIII. He tried to get his friend Roxas to come back to the organization, but Roxas disappeared and became part of Sora again. Now Axel is trying to help Sora—because Roxas is Sora—and he's betrayed the organization.

BELLE

One of the seven Princesses of Heart. She was nearly overtaken a year ago by those seeking the power of darkness, but the Beast saved her with some help from Sora and his friends.

NAMINE

A girl with the power to unchain people's memories and link them back together in different ways. Troubled by the mysteries of what the "heart" really is, she's trying to find her own path as a Nobody.

RIKUNANSEM

A sixteen-year-old boy who lived on Destiny Island, where he was always with Sora and Kairi. In Castle Oblivion, he chose to fight with the darkness in his heart controlled by Ansem rather than seal his heart away. That decision transformed him—and now he wears Ansem's appearance. He watches over Sora and his friends from the shadows.

PETE

He was banished to another dimension for his endless wrongdoing. Maleficent helped him escape, and now he's working with her to take over the worlds.

KING MICKEY

The king of Disney Castle. Like Sora, he has a Keyblade and travels around to save worlds. He knows the real Ansem, but the impostor seems somehow familiar...

SORA

A fifteen-year-old boy and the wielder of the Keyblade. Cheerful and straightforward, he has a strong sense of right and wrong. With his friends Donald and Goofy, he's on a quest to find Kairi and Riku. He just found out that the man they thought was Ansem is an impostor, and the real Ansem still remains. But Sora still doesn't know that Roxas, who was living in Twilight Town, was a piece of himself—his Nobody.

GOOFY

The captain of the knights at Disney Castle. He followed Donald, who left the castle in search of their king. With his laid-back nature, he fights with his shield to knock aside enemies rather than using something pointy like a sword. He's usually easygoing, but in a pinch, he shows his strength and practical insight.

DONALD DUCK

The royal magician of Disney Castle. Obeying a message from King Mickey to follow the Keyblade wielder, he travels the worlds along with Sora. He's stubborn and hot-headed, but he trusts his friend Sora and helps along the way with his powerful magic and stores of knowledge. They've finally joined up with King Mickey again in Hollow Bastion—but are about to encounter new enemies.

QUEEN MINNIE

The queen of Disney Castle, who is graceful and kind. She has an inner strength that lets her face any kind of trouble with calm dignity.

MALEFICENT

With an army of Heartless under her control, she plans to rule over the darkness. But when the Nobodies appeared, she reluctantly sided with Sora and his friends. She has Pete as a lackey.

PETE

He was banished to another dimension for his endless wrongdoing. Maleficent helped him escape, and now he's cooperating with her evil schemes. He seems to have some connection to King Hickey...

NAMINE

A Nobody girl with the power to unchain people's memories and link them back together in different ways. After fretting over the mysteries of the "heart," she's decided to follow her wish—to meet Kairi.

RIKU/ANSEM

A sixteen-year-old boy who lived on Destiny Island. He chose to fight with the darkness in his heart controlled by Ansem rather than seal his heart away. That decision transformed him—and now he wears Ansem's appearance. He watches over Sora and his friends from the shadows, giving them hints to help them on their quest.

AXEL

Number 8 of Organization XIII. His dear friend Roxas disappeared and became part of Sora again, so Axel is helping Sora from behind the scenes, because Roxas is Sora. He can't really explain why he's doing this—the existence of the "heart" always weighs on him.

KAIRI

A fifteen-year-old girl who always hung out with Sora and Riku and turned out to be one of the seven Princesses of Heart. Tired of simply waiting on Destiny Island for her friends to return, she had to do something—but just as she started to look for Sora, Organization XIII captured her.

GOOFY

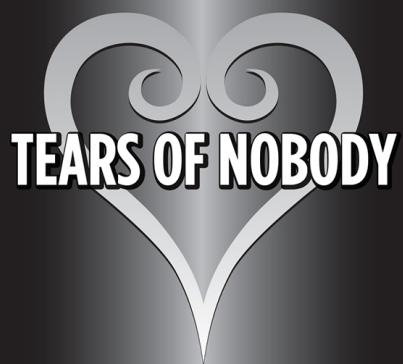
The captain of the knights at Disney Castle, journeying with Sora and Donald. With his laid-back nature, he fights with his shield to knock aside enemies rather than using something pointy like a sword. He's usually easygoing but has quick insight, making him the first to catch on in a strange situation.

DONALD DUCK

The royal magician of Disney Castle, helping Sora along the way with his various spells and stores of knowledge. He finally found King Mickey at Hollow Bastion, but he stays with Sora and Goofy to help defeat the Nobodies.

KING MICKEY

The king of Disney Castle and a Keyblade wielder like Sora. He's worried about the real Ansem, who was his friend, and he's seeking Kingdom Hearts in part to put a stop to Ansem's destructive mission for revenge.



TEARS OF NOBODY



CONFRONTATION



CHAPTER 1

CONFRONTATION

AS THE TERRIBLE RUMBLING ECHOED THROUGH HOLLOW BASTION, Sora and the others dashed outside.

They had no idea what was happening, but it was definitely *something*.

“I hope everybody’s okay...,” Goofy worried as they ran.

Sora heard the muttering behind him, but he kept running. Even if people were in trouble, the trio would help. They could fight.

Kairi, Riku, and the people of Hollow Bastion—they were more important than Kingdom Hearts or Nobodies.

Because Sora was on this quest to save Kairi, find Riku again, and help everyone.

“Let’s go!” he shouted as they hurried toward the castle postern.

Riku gazed at the woman clad in black-and-violet robes.

This was Hollow Bastion, the empty castle.

This place had once been called Radiant Garden, before it fell under Maleficent’s rule. Sora and his friends had driven her off and were finally beginning to restore the town to its former glory, but once again, Maleficent and the Heartless—and now the Nobodies—were trying to put a stop to that.

“So you are alive, Riku,” said Maleficent coldly.

“And you’re back from the dead, like I thought,” Riku answered quietly from under his hood.

“But of course. Like the darkness itself, I will not be vanquished. And aren’t you the same? You may change your form, but you cannot change your heart,” she said with a smile.

That scent particular to human beings could not be hidden so easily. And try as he might to disguise himself, with her magic, Maleficent could easily tell whose heart it was.

“Do you know about Organization XIII?” Riku asked.

“I have heard of it. Those fellows in black cloaks like yours?”

He nodded. “And the Nobodies.”

“Nobodies?” Maleficent repeated. He stood close enough that she could feel the breath from his words.

“I’m sure you’ve seen them. Those weird white creatures.”

Just as Riku spoke, the castle shook with a terrible rumble.

“They’re here.” He frowned, turned his back on Maleficent, and began to run.

“Wait, boy!”

“You’d better fight, too, if you don’t want to lose this castle,” he told her, ignoring her command, and plunged himself into inky darkness.

“Hmph. What could he have been after...?” Maleficent muttered.

Then she heard Pete shouting from behind her. “This is bad! Maleficent!”

She turned deliberately to ask, “Now what?”

“Those things. The white things...!” Pete gasped out, pointing behind him.

“Well, speak of the devils...” Maleficent laughed softly, quite unruffled, and advanced toward them.

Just after Sora and his friends rushed outside because of the noise...a man in a black cloak stole into the empty computer lab.

The screen displayed a picture of a man with a white beard.

Axel quietly pushed back his hood, revealing a shock of bright red hair. He squinted, leaning closer to peer at the screen.

But there was something else that grabbed his attention more than the man in the picture—something about the computer system itself.

The interface looked familiar. It was a lot like the one the computers in the organization headquarters used.

That wasn’t the only thing giving Axel déjà vu. He stared at the screen...

“...What are you doing here?” said a voice behind him.

Axel spun around to find another man in black standing there.

Seeing that Axel was ready to fight, the newcomer pushed his hood back and shifted his shoulders.

“Ansem... Oh, Riku, it’s you.” Axel breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing the face. “Don’t scare me like that, okay? I got people after me, y’know.”

“Well, if so, you should be a little more cautious.” Riku pulled up his hood again and went to join Axel in front of the computer. “You’re weak anyway,” he added, and a small laugh escaped him.

“Wh— Hey, I just let my guard down for—”

“So this is Ansem’s computer?” Riku interrupted Axel’s protest. “Who’s the man in this picture?”

“Beats me.” Axel shrugged.

“...I thought someone in the organization would be more help.”

“I’m *not* in the organization!”

Ignoring Axel, Riku began typing on the keyboard, and the screen displayed some data about the man. It seemed Sora and the others had left the information unlocked.

“...Ansem? ...That’s the real Ansem?” Riku murmured, reading the text above the picture.

Beside him, Axel stayed quiet. A little while back, when he and Riku had exchanged information, they’d both come to understand that the man who called himself Ansem had only stolen Ansem’s name.

“Oh!” Axel blurted.

“What is it?”

“I remember now! The screen looks like that computer in Twilight Town!” he exclaimed with certainty. The details of the system interface were the same.

The one in Twilight Town had seemed more advanced, though. As if this one was its predecessor.

“It has the same layout and the functions. That computer was managing Twilight Town, and this one is managing Hollow Bastion. Both of these systems were developed for town administration. There’s no way anyone else could’ve designed this. It has to mean they both have the same creator.”

As Axel rushed to explain, Riku only kept staring silently at the computer.

“...So where did the real Ansem go?” Axel said finally.

“There is one person whose true identity we don’t know,” Riku muttered.

At that, Axel looked up from the screen, meeting Riku’s eyes.

Someone was there.

After she’d come to Twilight Town, Naminé had never set foot outside of the white room. She hadn’t gone to the lab in the basement or to the town itself. She just prayed and drew pictures.

Today was different.

She could sense someone in the basement lab—a presence she didn’t recognize at all.

Uncertainly, heart pounding, Naminé left the white room. She crossed the long hallway to the room at the far end and, step by step, descended the stairs to the basement.

In front of the single door, Naminé paused.

There was no doubt—he had returned.

She took a deep breath and opened the door.

A man was there, illuminated by the blue-white glow from a computer screen. "I thought you went with Riku."

"DiZ?" said Naminé. "When did you come back?"

"Exactly what I'd like to ask you, Naminé." DiZ turned in his chair, looking somehow amused.

"I..."

"Ice cream?" DiZ held out a blue ice cream pop. "It's sea salt."

Still nervous, she accepted it.

"Sora really is something else," DiZ mused. "It seems he infiltrated the system and restored that modified program to normal."

"What do you mean?" asked Naminé.

DiZ only smiled and took out another ice pop, then bit into it.

"Hey, DiZ. Are you a bad guy or a good guy?"

"...Well...I can't answer that myself."

At that ambiguous reply, Naminé lowered her eyes, disappointed.

"Oh, that's right. I have something more important than ice cream to share with you." He stood up and handed her a single photograph.

"This is..."

It depicted Hayner, Olette, Pence, and Roxas.

"Those are all the presents I have for you. Now I'm afraid I must disappear."

"Wait—DiZ!"

"Oh yes." He shrugged and pointed to a small door under the computer. "There's lots of sea-salt ice cream in the freezer there. Have as many as you like. Or share it if anyone comes by."

"Hey, DiZ, hold on!" The moment she tried to run after him, he vanished.

She didn't know what he was planning.

When he'd taken Sora from that castle, he'd said it was for his protection.

But DiZ had hurt Roxas—even let him be destroyed—to wake Sora up.

Roxas had to disappear. I know that. I understand it, but something inside me makes me reject that.

Did he really have to disappear?

The heart probably had secrets unknown even to DiZ.

The Heartless were an embodiment of the darkness in the heart. When a Heartless was born, it created a Nobody, too—an empty physical form.

Then...a Nobody is.....

Sora had to be the one who held the key. By coming into contact with him, the heart would awaken.

And that means.....

"...It's salty...but sweet," Naminé murmured after taking a bite of

the ice cream.

The Nobodies and the Heartless grappled in the open hall.

“Hear me, my Heartless!” Maleficent called, looking down upon the battle. “Attack the white husks. Sweep them away!”

Behind her, Pete hid his face in terror. The Nobodies clearly had the advantage. “Maleficent, we’re never gonna win! I don’t know about you—but I’m outta here!”

He ran off.

“You pathetic coward!” Maleficent fumed, but Pete didn’t look back.

Meanwhile, the Nobodies were cutting swaths through the Heartless, and Maleficent took a step back.

That moment, a certain trio hurtled into the great hall—Sora and the king’s lackeys.

But King Mickey, the leader, was no longer with them.

“Maleficent!”

At Sora’s shout, she glanced toward them and gave a small contemptuous laugh. “Heartless! Leave the white ones. Turn your attention to Sora and his friends!”

With that, she vanished from the scene.

All at once, the Heartless turned from their fight with Nobodies and set their sights on the trio.

“Uh-oh...,” said Goofy.

“We can take ’em both!” Sora dashed into the swarm of Heartless and Nobodies.

Both enemies posed a danger to this world, so to Sora and the others, there was hardly any difference between them. It just meant they had more than one kind of adversary.

“*Fire! Fire!*” Donald yelled, waving his wand.

“Gee, I guess we gotta.” With his shield out, Goofy joined the melee.

Outside the castle, Leon, Yuffie, and Aerith battled the onslaught of Nobodies.

They were just beginning to restore the town of Hollow Bastion. They couldn’t let a bunch of Nobodies destroy it now. They had to stop the Nobodies from infiltrating the town any further.

“They just keep coming...,” Aerith murmured, facing the Nobodies that poured endlessly from the castle.

“But it’s up to us to protect the town!” Yuffie shouted back, shuriken in hand, but a Nobody knocked her to the ground.

“Yuffie!” Aerith gave her a healing potion. “Right now would be...”

In the throng of Nobodies, she looked up at the sky. *Right now would be a good time for him to come.*

And just then, a blade flashed among the swarm.

“Cloud...!” Aerith cried.

The owner of that blade—an enormous sword that he had to rest on his shoulder—was a blond youth dashing through the Nobodies toward Leon.

“Tch.” Surrounded, the latter made a noise of frustration.

Cloud turned to face the Nobodies, back-to-back with Leon.

“Think you can handle this many?” Leon said with his gunblade ready.

“Well... Might be tough if one more shows up,” Cloud replied without much concern.

Leon smirked. “Then that’ll have to be the one *I* take care of.”

“What, you’re fighting, too?” With that good-natured jeer, Cloud sprang into the sea of silver and whirled into action. Not a moment later, Leon began carving a path through the Nobodies.

They would both fight to protect their home.

Axel and Riku stood at the cliff by the postern, gazing down at the writhing mass of Nobodies.

“Now what are you gonna do?” Axel wondered.

Riku never took his eyes off the battle with Leon and his friends as he retorted, “What about you?”

“I’m not telling.”

Apparently, Axel had something in mind.

“I’m gonna try to help Sora and the gang,” Riku informed him. “They’ve got their work cut out for them, fighting a horde like this.”

He was about to leap down from the cliff, Soul Eater in hand, when—

“Riku!” a voice called from behind him, and he froze.

“...Your Majesty?” Quietly, Riku turned.

“Good thing I found ya!” King Mickey ran to him.

Riku instinctively glanced in Axel’s direction and noticed the redhead was averting his gaze uncomfortably.

“Who are you...?” the king asked warily.

“Axel,” he replied, mildly annoyed. “Got it memorized?”

King Mickey nodded, then confirmed his suspicions. “...You’re a member of the organization, huh?”

“You guessed it,” Axel said, quite unabashed.

“He betrayed them, though,” Riku added.

At that, the king looked between the two, then focused on Riku. "Is he on our side?"

"No idea," Axel interjected.

"It's true," said Riku, finding it a bit funny. "We're not sure whose side he's on."

"But you're friends," said King Mickey.

Mildly surprised at that, Riku looked at Axel.

"Nobodies don't have friends," Axel snapped.

"I'm glad to see you're not all alone, Riku!" the king said with genuine relief as Axel slumped wordlessly.

"Where's Sora?" Riku asked, unable to hold the question in any longer.

"He'll be along soon," King Mickey replied. "He said he's looking for you and Kairi... He really wants to see you."

Riku shook his head. "Well, I don't want to see him."

"But Riku—"

"Please don't, Your Majesty." He didn't let the king finish. "You already promised, didn't you? Don't tell Sora about me."

"All right. But it won't be easy to keep him off your trail."

Riku smiled slightly. "Well, it is Sora, after all. Anyway...did you find any clues about where Ansem the Wise might be?"

"I just don't know," said King Mickey. "It felt like I was awful close to him at one point..."

"So you did feel his presence...?" Riku looked down.

The real Ansem the Wise...and there was one more whose true identity they didn't know. What if they were connected...?

"Hey, Your Majesty... Where did you feel like he was close?" Axel leaned down to ask. "Was it...in Twilight Town?"

King Mickey stared back at him, startled. "It sure was! But how'd you know?"

Axel and Riku exchanged a glance.

"Naminé's in danger...isn't she?" Axel muttered, his expression darkening.

"Your Majesty, I'll go to Twilight Town," said Riku. "If Ansem the Wise is there, maybe I'll find him."

"Riku?"

As the king looked up at him, mystified, he nodded once more and brought the darkness of the rift up about him.

"Gosh... Riku's always running off like that." King Mickey gave Axel a bemused look. "What'll you do now?"

"Uh..." Axel was similarly at a loss.

"Well, I'm getting a whiff of a good friend of mine from you." The king stepped closer, his nose twitching. "I thought it was from Riku, but it's from you."

“Do I smell?” Axel hurried to sniff his clothes. He couldn’t smell anything.

“I wonder where Pluto went...” The king heaved a sigh.

“Pluto? What, that dog?”

“Yup! Oh, boy, you did meet Pluto!” Overjoyed, King Mickey grabbed Axel’s hand and shook it vigorously.

“...I mean, I’ve had a shower since then...,” Axel mumbled, still confused.

“So, what are you gonna do now?”

The king’s bright, clear eyes were trained on him. Axel frowned and took a deep breath. His voice came out faint. “I want to tell Sora I’m sorry.”

“...Axel. You’re...a Nobody, right?”

He gave a tiny nod. “So I can’t destroy other Nobodies,” he said, more quietly than before.

Unless he was actually in danger, Axel couldn’t fight Nobodies. Not when he was one himself. He didn’t want to make them disappear.

But even about that, he had his doubts.

Weren’t Nobodies supposed to be destroyed?

He didn’t know what to do. He just couldn’t fight something so similar to him.

“I’m thinking I’d like to get Sora and the others off this world, and soon,” said King Mickey. “I’m not sure either whether we should be fightin’ the Nobodies or the organization.”

“What about the Heartless? Don’t you have to fight them, too?” Axel asked, back to his usual tone.

“What d’you mean?”

“Well—,” Axel began, but the king suddenly turned.

“Oh no! Here they are!” King Mickey leaned over the cliff face and shouted to him, “We’ll talk later, Axel!”

Then he leaped from the cliff. Watching him descend, Axel gazed over the edge for a while.

When Sora, Donald, and Goofy left the postern, they came across some ruins. The path that should have been there was destroyed, leaving only the sheared-off edge of a cliff. All around there were deep cracks in the earth.

And in the distance, they could see a swarm of Nobodies steadily advancing toward them.

They rushed forward to meet it.

Then a figure in a black cloak hurtled down from overhead, somersaulting through the air before landing.

“Your Majesty!” Donald called out.

It was none other than King Mickey. But with his back to them, he spread his arms to stop them. “Okay, fellas—you’ve gotta go find Riku and Kairi!”

“But Leon and the others are our friends, too!” Sora protested.

“Don’t worry,” the king told him without turning around. “There’s already lots of help here. We’ll take care of this fight.”

“I promised Leon...” Sora hung his head. Even if the king was instructing him to go, he couldn’t just run away from a promise.

I want to help Leon and everyone. I want to protect the town, Sora thought. Riku and Kairi will still be there... Please just let them wait a little longer.

“Donald, Goofy! Take Sora and get goin’!”

Hearing that, Donald and Goofy looked at each other.

“Quick!” King Mickey urged them.

They couldn’t see his face or guess what he was thinking. Still, Donald stood at attention. “Your Majesty!”

“We’ll go look for Riku and Kairi!” Goofy declared.

“Right. Be careful!” said King Mickey, his back still turned.

“You too, Your Majesty!” Donald replied.

Sora turned to him. “Wait—you guys!”

Donald and Goofy gazed back at him, stiff as soldiers.

“Hurry up, Sora!”

“You’re comin’ with us whether you like it or not!”

But despite their words, they didn’t move.

“C’mon, do as you’re told!” Donald said with a wink.

A smile came to Sora’s face, and he nodded. “Okay, okay.”

“Well then, skedaddle!” said Goofy.

Sora mouthed his reply.

Thank you.

“Let’s go!” Donald prompted, and Sora sprinted away as hard as he could—past King Mickey—leaping down the stairs.

“Sora! Wait!” The king started after them.

“Sorry, Your Majesty!” Sora shouted his apology and kept going.

“Hope you can forgive us!” added Goofy.

“Quack!” Donald agreed.

“...Fiddlesticks,” King Mickey said under his breath.

“Kind of a handful, aren’t they?” Axel was there behind him. “And somebody from the organization’s about to make an appearance, too.”

“What...?!” King Mickey was about to resume chasing them when Axel grabbed his shoulder and stopped him.

“Look, I know the guy. Those three can handle him.”

The king anxiously looked down the stairs after them.

The door to the computer lab suddenly opened, and Naminé whirled around.

“Naminé!” the visitor exclaimed.

She said his name, sea-salt ice cream in hand. “...Riku?”

“Is DiZ here?” he asked, a little out of breath.

Naminé shook her head. “He left. But how did you know he would be here?”

“The computers.” Riku crossed the room to DiZ’s computer and tried typing, but all he got was an error message and an automated reply:

“Please enter the password.”

“What about the computers?” said Naminé.

“The system on this one and the system on the computer in Hollow Bastion are almost exactly the same. That means there’s a good chance the same person designed them.” Riku tried typing in the words that came to mind, but every time, he got the error message. As he uneasily pecked at the keyboard, he went on explaining. “Sora restored the system in Hollow Bastion. If something went wrong with it there, I thought DiZ would come back here.”

“...So DiZ made the computer system in Hollow Bastion?” Naminé asked.

Riku turned to face her. “No—Ansem the Wise made the one *here*.”

“But that means...”

“Right. I think DiZ *is* Ansem the Wise.”

Naminé’s breath caught, and uncertainty clouded her expression. “But why...why would someone like that...?”

“—DiZ didn’t tell you anything?”

“No. Nothing. He just gave me this ice cream and a picture.” She showed Riku her treat, minus a single bite, and the photograph.

“Sea-salt ice cream...?” Riku turned back to the computer as if something had occurred to him and typed in a few words. “There. I’m in.”

“The ice cream was the password?” said Naminé. “Then does this picture mean something...?”

Riku peered at the photo of Roxas and his friends. “It was taken in front of the mansion. Maybe...”

He fell silent, glaring at the monitor.

“When DiZ looked at me this time, he didn’t seem as cold as before. I wonder why...?” Naminé murmured. “Oh, the ice cream. He said I could share it if anyone comes by.”

She knelt down and opened the little door beside her feet, releasing a gust of cold air. The inside was stacked with sea-salt ice cream pops.

“Want one, Riku?” She held one out to him.

He accepted and took a bite. “...It’s salty...but kind of sweet...”

“It’s good, though, isn’t it? It was Roxas’s favorite.” Sorrow crossed Naminé’s face.

“Sea-salt ice cream and a photo...” With the ice pop in his hand, Riku eyed the transporter device in the center of the room. “Is he saying to give it to Sora...? As a hint pointing to this place?”

Naminé nodded. “That might be it. I think DiZ—I mean, Ansem the Wise—has some kind of plan.”

“Hey, Naminé... Is there something you haven’t told me—well, haven’t told *us*?”

She looked at the floor. “...I’m not sure of it yet. The secrets of the heart...aren’t something I can talk about, not yet,” she told him in a tiny voice and took another bite of ice cream.

The trio hurled themselves straight into the mass of Nobodies.

Or they were about to—but someone stood in their way.

“*Wak!*” Unable to stop in time, Donald crashed into the man at full speed. “Get outta the way!”

Holding his bruised bill, Donald glared up at him—then noticed that the man wore a black cloak and jumped back.

“You guys sure are looking lively,” the man remarked.

Sora recognized the face and the voice. “Hey, didn’t we catch you messing around in the Underworld? How’d a wimp like you get into Organization XIII?”

Demyx backed away, pretending to be cowed.

“Can you even fight?” Sora taunted, folding his arms.

“We won’t hold back!” Donald added.

“It’s wrong to judge people by appearances,” Demyx told them with a self-confidence completely opposed to his earlier attitude.

“You sure about that?” Sora held the Keyblade ready.

“...I told them they were sending the wrong guy.” Demyx’s expression fell again, and he scratched his head in frustration, confidence gone.

“...What’s up with him?” Sora muttered, baffled at his constantly changing mood.

“Remember, Sora?” said Goofy. “The organization’s made up of Nobodies.”

“Oh, right! No hearts!” Sora nodded and fixed a glare on Demyx.

“Aw, we do too have hearts. Please don’t be mad!” Now he looked apologetic.

“You can’t fool us!” shouted Donald, waving his wand.

“Silence, traitor.” Pointing at Sora, Demyx had transformed again,

grimly furious. He dashed at the trio and brandished his weapon, which resembled a huge stringed instrument—a sitar.

“Who’s this traitor?!” Sora demanded, blocking the attack.

“Traitors are traitors!” Demyx sprang into the air, and a wave of water gushed out of the ground.

“Whoa!”

The ferocious wave knocked them back, and the spray took on shapes—watery copies of Demyx surrounding them.

“Ack!”

“*Fire! Blizzard!*” Donald shot off spells at the copies, which splashed into nothing with one hit.

The trio made quick work of the rest of the clones and then began to chase down Demyx. But jets of water spouted up from near his feet, and they couldn’t get close.

“That’s cheatin’!” Goofy complained.

“I don’t see how!” Demyx retorted and fired more water at them.

“*Thunder!*” Donald managed to stop one of the jets with a spell.

“Nice work, Donald!” Sora saw the opening and rushed at Demyx.

“Quick, take him down!” Donald called.

“You got it!” Sora leaped up to attack—and so did Demyx, sitar poised.

“Having fun yet?”

“Not really!” Sora brought down the Keyblade.

“*Gah!*” Demyx yelped. That was all it took to send him crashing into the ground. He let out a pitiful whine as his sitar dissolved into water trickling between his fingers. “Aw, c’mon, no way!”

“Yes way.” Sora stared down at him.

Before his eyes, a dark mist enveloped Demyx, and then he was gone.

“Anyone from the organization who wants to be next?” Sora shouted at the empty square.

“Hey, Sora...” Donald tugged at his hand, then stood up to scold with his arms folded. “Don’t antagonize them!”

“Yeah, we gotta go help out our friends first,” Goofy said cheerfully, running over to join them.

“Oh, right. Sorry.” Sora rubbed his head sheepishly.

“Then let’s go!” said Donald.

Sora nodded, but that moment, the king’s piping voice rang out. “*Aha!* There you are!”

Donald and Goofy stopped in their tracks just before they could run ahead. They turned to find a very unhappy-looking King Mickey.

He glared at the trio for a few tense moments—then broke into a grin. “You sure do have a lot of friends to help.”

All three of them exhaled in relief.

“All right,” said King Mickey, “we’d better pull together and finish this battle for good!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the trio replied in unison and then smiled at one another.

But before they could set off, there was an explosion above. Boulders came tumbling down.

“Look out!” cried Goofy, but there was no time. He darted forward, knocking the king aside—and a falling stone struck him.

“Goofy?!”

The others rushed to where he was sprawled on the ground.

His eyes didn’t open.

“Hey! You’re the king’s captain! Get yourself together!” Donald desperately shook him by the shoulders.

Goofy stayed limp and motionless.

“C’mon, wake up!” Sora was shouting, too.

“Goofy, it’s time for dinner!” Donald tried. But Goofy didn’t respond even to that.

At a slight distance from the others, King Mickey edged away.

“Goofy...?” Donald thumped on Goofy’s chest, and his voice came out half-sobbing. “G-Goofy...”

“This isn’t happening... It can’t be happening...” Sora peered at Goofy’s face. “You’ve gotta be kidding...right?”

“They’ll pay for this...!” King Mickey flung off his cloak and stared furiously ahead, his fist clenched around his Keyblade.

And then he dashed toward the writhing Nobodies.

“Waaaaaak!” With his own battle cry, Donald followed.

Sora reached out for Donald and grabbed his hand, turning back for one more look at their fallen friend.

Then he ran, as if to escape his own emotions.



UNDER THE WORLD

CHAPTER 2

UNDER THE WORLD

THE MAN'S BLACK CLOAK FLUTTERED BEHIND HIM as he marched forward.

The present, the past, the future.

Human, Heartless, Nobody.

Xehanort, Ansem, Xemnas.

His plans had already advanced past the point of no return.

With Demyx's demise, the group calling itself Organization XIII had lost more than half of its members.

Vexen, Lexaeus, Zexion, Marluxia, Larxene, Demyx. And Roxas.

All the fallen ones—do they bear a grudge against me?

But they were Nobodies. They had no hearts with which to hold any ill will. They couldn't even understand what the heart is.

Now, then... I wonder if that little king remembers me?

Xemnas gazed up at the enormous moon in the night sky.

Sora carved a path through the untold thousands of Heartless.

"Leon!"

The members of the Restoration Committee all fought with everything they had to protect their town.

Sora and his Keyblade fought their way toward them. He couldn't see Donald or King Mickey anymore. *Where did they get to...?*

Or Goofy.

Who would never wake up again.

That can't be real. Can it?

The people of Radiant Garden had lived in peace, with Ansem the Wise maintaining the balance of their world.

In the center of the town was a small research facility where Ansem and his apprentices carried out their many experiments.

His apprentices numbered six—Xehanort, Even, Ienzo, Braig, Dilan, and Aeueus—and each was brilliant in his own way.

Ansem, however, had only one objective: to uncover the secrets of the darkness in the heart.

With Even's assistance, Ansem performed a little experiment on Xehanort. It was meant to awaken the memories sleeping in Xehanort's heart.

Ansem no longer understood what had precipitated it. But at some point, the research slipped from his control, and his apprentices found experimental subjects on their own. They continued the studies in an enormous laboratory built under Ienzo's direction.

And then the night when they opened the Door to Darkness, meteors rained down on their world.

That meteor shower was the reason his apprentices' unusual activities even came to Ansem's attention.

"You're conducting experiments *without my supervision?!* " he bellowed at his apprentices, all gathered in his study.

"But Master Ansem—," Xehanort began.

"I don't want to hear it. Shut it down immediately!" Ansem snapped. "I won't have anyone opening the Door to Darkness."

Xehanort, the young man who had once lost his memory, desperately persisted. "But the truth of the worlds is there."

"I will not allow it! Out. I'm sealing off the entire laboratory."

At that, the apprentices all gloomily hung their heads and left the lab. Ansem made sure the door was closed and locked behind them before he sank into a chair and let out a bone-deep sigh.

Could those six have hit upon anything about the darkness in the heart?

Had they grown entangled in that darkness themselves while pursuing its mysteries?

There was no doubt Ansem himself had led to all this as the one who'd begun these experiments. He tried to think what he could do to correct this grave mistake—

And that was when it happened.

Axel looked down at Goofy where he lay sprawled on the ground and uncertainly scratched his own head. "Uh...hello?" he tried, not too loud, and then he prodded at Goofy's cheek. "C'mon, get up already."

"A-hyuck?" Goofy didn't open his eyes, but he managed to slightly move his head, which had a sizable bump.

"Seriously..." Axel sighed. "For a king, that guy sure doesn't know what he's doing."

"—?"

Goofy's eyes blinked open.

"Oh, there you are." Axel had been peering into Goofy's face, so

he retreated a step.

“Organization XIII...?!” Goofy jumped up with plenty of life in him and readied his shield, but then a dizzy spell washed over him. He spun around on one foot and fell flat on his behind.

“Take it easy, will you?” Axel crouched down and dabbed a potion on Goofy’s head.

“Who’re you?” Goofy rubbed at the bump and looked up at Axel.

“I’m not telling.”

“Gee, you’re not in the organization?”

“Again, not telling.” Axel folded his arms, smirking down at Goofy.

“...You smell like Pluto,” said Goofy.

“What, that again?” Axel let out a sigh and gave him a hint of a real smile. “Sora and the others went that way, Goofy.”

“Without me?!” Goofy sprang to his feet.

“You better go catch ’em.”

“Well, uh... Thanks, pal.” He nodded and waved to Axel, then ran off with plunking steps.

Axel watched him go and then vanished into a dark rift himself.

It was a while after the night of the meteor shower.

“Xehanort!” cried Even, bursting into the experimental lab in the basement. The other apprentices looked up from the various computers where they were sorting their data.

This lab also served as a facility for producing Heartless in mass quantities.

“What’s the matter?” asked Dilan with a nasty smirk. “Did Master Ansem say something again?”

“No—there’s a visitor from somewhere else,” Even replied. “Apparently, there really are *other worlds*.”

Xehanort frowned. “What does that mean?”

“Someone calling himself the king of one of those worlds came to visit Master Ansem. And from his appearance, it’s obvious he is indeed from another world. Said his name is Mickey, I believe...”

“So, the opening of the door affects the worlds,” Ienzo said quietly.

Aeleus and Braig had nothing to add.

“Let’s go and see.” Xehanort got to his feet and wasted no time heading for Ansem’s room upstairs.

Even followed him.

As he helped Leon and his friends fight, Sora eventually reached the

shelter of a small ravine, created by heaps of boulders crashing against one another.

"You okay?" King Mickey asked. He and Donald were already there waiting for him.

"I'm fine, but..." Trying to catch his breath, Sora looked away, hanging his head.

"Oh... Goofy..." Donald's gaze dropped, too, as he spoke the name of their dear departed friend.

Silence fell—but it was soon broken.

"Hey, fellas!" called an easygoing voice.

Sora, Donald, and King Mickey exchanged a glance and turned toward the sound.

It was Goofy, waving to them cheerfully. "Why'd ya go and leave me behind like that?"

"Goofy!" They ran to him.

"Y'know, that bump on the head really hurt." Goofy ran to meet them.

The king was the first to reach him and throw his arms around him. "Aw, Goofy!"

"Gawrsh, Your Majesty, it's okay. I get bumped all the time," he said, totally innocent.

Sora and Donald's eyes met, and they broke into grins.

"*Quack!*" Then Donald stepped forward and whacked Goofy in the shin with his wand.

"Ouch! That hurt, too!"

"You're really here!" Donald blurted, as Goofy hopped about in pain.

"Whatcha talkin' about?"

"Don't ever do that again!" Donald was about to burst into tears.

"Do what?"

Then Donald and the king looked at each other and laughed.

"You had us really worried there, Goofy!" Now Sora launched himself at Goofy in a tackle hug.

The four of them huddled together.

"So, I guess we gotta keep fighting, huh?" said Goofy. Sora nodded.

They could still see the horde of Nobodies in the distance. But the creatures had stopped moving.

"Huh?" King Mickey cocked his head.

"What're they doing?" Sora's heart started pounding as he squinted at them.

"Well, we better go find out!" said Donald, and the four friends set off again.

As they emerged from the ravine, they saw someone there—a man

in a black cloak.

He turned toward them and slowly pushed back his hood. The face underneath strongly resembled Ansem's, with silver hair and sharp glinting eyes staring down at them.

"It's him!" cried Donald. "The guy who's not Ansem!"

"You mean his Nobody!" Goofy corrected him.

"And the leader of Organization XIII..." Sora glared at the man.

Then King Mickey exclaimed, "Wait a minute—that's it!"

Ansem's study was piled high with books and documents. At the large desk in the center of the room, Ansem sat munching on an ice cream pop, listening intently to the visitor from another world.

The blue salty-sweet ice cream was his favorite—sea-salt ice cream.

"Wise Ansem, I've come to seek your advice," said the king.

Ansem smiled. "I'm glad we have an opportunity to speak like this, my friend. Your hypothesis is most intriguing. To be frank, it's not easy to stave off the urge to test it." He paused there, taking another bite of ice cream, and his expression darkened. "Still, I'm concerned about the stability of the worlds."

He knew that the door had already been opened. It was the reckless actions of his apprentices, merely based on his own experiments, and yet he couldn't help but feel the blame lay entirely with him.

"Yep, that's what worries me, too," the king replied.

"The doors that appeared and the place the Heartless seek... I fear my research may have brought this upon us..." Ansem rested his forehead in his hands.

Then there was a knock at the door. A young man stepped into the study—Xehanort. "Master Ansem, regarding the experiment I presented the other day... With your permission—"

"Which is denied! Forget this talk of doors and the heart of all worlds!" Ansem stood to stare down Xehanort and told him with quiet finality, "That place must not be defiled."

The heart was sacrosanct. And the darkness within the heart must never be tampered with.

Darkness in the heart would invite darkness in the world... The world would be corrupted, and its stability would break down. And they must not let that happen.

"But Master Ansem... I've been thinking that—"

Ansem shook his head. "Xehanort, those thoughts are best forgotten."

Defeated, Xehanort took a step back, nodded, and left the room.

"I remember now! It was Ansem's apprentice Xehanort!" cried King Mickey.

The Nobody only smirked.

"The leader of Organization XIII is Xehanort's Nobody!" The Keyblade flashed in his hand as the king rushed at him.

"Let's go!" Sora tried to follow—but found Nobodies blocking his way. He lashed out with the Keyblade. "Move it!"

"We can't let Xehanort get away!" Donald called.

"Right!" Sora replied. Donald and Goofy gave him a thumbs-up, and Sora turned.

Then he ran straight into a mass of Heartless.

Xehanort pondered what he'd heard of the conversation between Ansem and King Mickey.

So there was a key called the Keyblade, said to have the power to open any door.

There was a strange material that enabled one to fly through the Other Sky—Gummi blocks, fallen pieces from that meteor shower.

And something about women known as the Princesses of Heart.

All these immensely important shards of information began to fit together in Xehanort's mind.

"What in the world were they talking about?" said Even, who had been trying to eavesdrop.

Xehanort ignored him and continued down the stairs to the basement laboratory. He flung open the door, and the others all turned to him at once.

"Aeleus, where is the girl?" Xehanort asked.

"She's asleep..." Aeleus pointed to the capsule room in the back.

The girl was very particular—unique among people. They had not been able to create any Heartless using her heart.

Perhaps because she was too young, or perhaps...

Xehanort disappeared into the capsule room.

He had no idea how many Heartless he'd taken down. Sora gasped for breath as he waited for Donald and Goofy to catch up.

"Sora!" They hurried up to him.

"Where's the king?" Sora asked, a little worried.

Donald and Goofy frantically scanned the area. Then Donald pointed. "Over there!"

"Your Majesty!"

They dashed to where the king gripped his Keyblade and glared at a silver-haired man atop the cliff. "Xehanort!"

“How long has it been since I abandoned that name...?” the man murmured as if to himself, not even turning to glance at the king.

“Out with it, Nobody!” Sora readied his own Keyblade. “Where’s Kairi? Where’s Riku?!”

“I know nothing of any Kairi.” Xehanort’s Nobody slowly turned to face them. “As for Riku...you might try asking your king.”

Then a dark space opened behind him, and he slipped into it.

“Stop!” King Mickey leaped into the darkness after him.

“Your Majesty—!” Sora scrambled to follow, too, but the rift closed before his eyes, and they were gone.

“...” His outstretched arm fell limply to his side, and he slumped to the ground.

The king knows something about Riku? Then why wouldn't he tell me? I missed my chance to find out... Riku, where are you?

“Sora...” Goofy put a hand on his shoulder.

“Sora, Goofy!” Donald shouted from behind them. “The Nobodies are all gone!”

Sora got up, and they peeked over the edge of the cliff.

The land below had been swarming with Nobodies—and now they couldn’t see a single one.

Goofy cocked his head. “Gawrsh, what’s that mean?”

“Means you fell right into their trap.”

At the sudden voice from behind them, the trio jumped and whirled around. It was the red-haired organization member, Axel, leaning against a boulder.

Sora and Donald automatically prepared for a fight, while Goofy tilted his head again.

“It’s a setup by Organization XIII, okay?” said Axel. “Xemnas is using you to destroy the Heartless.”

“Xemnas?” Donald repeated.

“The guy you just saw. He’s their leader. Got it memorized? X-E-M-N-A-S.”

Goofy rubbed at the bump on his head. *Isn't this the same fella who just helped me out?*

“So Organization XIII wants to get rid of the Heartless?” he wondered aloud.

“Pfft, no. Look, every time you take down a Heartless with the Keyblade, a heart gets released, right? *That's* what the organization is after.”

“What are they gonna do with all those hearts?” Donald demanded.

Axel shrugged. “Not telling.”

“You’d better!” Donald began waving his wand.

Then Sora realized something and peered into Axel’s face. *Wait—*

do I...know his name?

I've never seen him before, but I know him.

He felt sad somehow, like he missed someone.

That voice, that attitude... Axel. His name is Axel.

But who is he? Oh—I remember. The guy with the scar on his forehead said he was trying to find Axel. Sora's mind raced. No, there's something else... He...he did something...!

"You— You're the one who kidnapped Kairi!"

Axel twitched a little at that. "Bingo. The name's Axel. Got it memorized?" he replied, eyes narrowed as he smiled sardonically.

"Where is she?!" cried Sora.

He flinched again and then scratched his head.

"Please just tell me!"

Seeing Sora nearly hunched over in his desperation, Axel's gaze rose to the sky. "Look, about Kairi... I'm sorry."

The air began wavering.

"Axel!" another voice called. Someone stepped out of a dark portal—the man with the terrible scar on his forehead, Saïx.

"Uh-oh." Axel preemptively shielded himself and stepped back, and then another rift in space opened up to absorb him.

"No, wait!" Sora rushed to stop him.

Saïx blocked his path. "We'll ensure that he receives a suitable punishment."

Before their eyes, the darkness engulfed Axel.

"I don't care about any of that! Just take me along with you!" Sora pleaded.

Saïx slowly turned and looked down at him. "If it's Kairi you're worried about, don't. We're taking very good care of her."

"Let me see her."

"Is she that important to you?"

"More than anything." Sora clenched his fists. He had to see Kairi, no matter what it took.

"Show me how important."

Sora lowered his eyes for a moment, and then quietly knelt down, his head bowed low. "Please."

"So, you really do care for her," Saïx mused. "In that case... absolutely not."

Sora sprang to his feet again. "You rotten—"

"Are you angry? Do you hate me? Then take that rage and bring it down upon the Heartless." Saïx snapped his fingers, and an array of Heartless appeared one by one behind him.

The trio quickly assumed their fighting stances, as Saïx went on with a low monologue. "Pitiful Heartless, mindlessly collecting hearts. And yet they know not the true power of what they hold. The rage of

the Keyblade releases those hearts. They gather in darkness, masterless and free...until they weave together to form Kingdom Hearts. And when that time comes at last, we can truly exist."

He almost sounded as though he were reciting an incantation.

"Was that supposed to—?" Sora began, but someone else spoke over him.

"What do you think you're prattling on about?"

Sora knew that voice. And indeed, Maleficent had appeared behind them.

"Kingdom Hearts belongs to me! The heart of all worlds, the heart of all that lives. A dominion fit to be called Kingdom Hearts must be my dominion!" She raised her staff.

"Maleficent, no! No more Heartless!" cried Sora.

"I do not take orders from you!"

With that, a ring of Heartless appeared around Saïx, creeping closer and closer.

"Fool..." Saïx snapped his fingers again, summoning Nobodies, and in a matter of seconds they defeated the Heartless. Having completed their task, they turned on the trio.

"Oh no!" Sora braced himself for the Nobodies to attack, but a green haze rose up before they reached him. "...Huh?"

It was Maleficent, now standing in front of them. "While I keep these creatures at bay, you devise a way to vanquish them—forever!"

The blast of green flame, for once not directed at Sora, began obliterating the Nobodies.

"Maleficent...?" Sora tried to approach her.

"Do not misunderstand me," she said without turning around. "I shall have my revenge on you yet."

"Maleficent!" he shouted again. The Nobodies were swarming her.

"Go! Now!" Maleficent was covered in those silver creatures.

"I don't take orders from you!" He was about to run ahead and help, but Donald caught his sleeve.

"Sora, c'mon!"

"But...we can't just..." As Sora stood there hesitating, emerald fire rose from her. She vanished, and a writhing cluster of Nobodies fell in a pile.

"Maleficent!" he called, but she was nowhere to be found.

"Now, then—where were we before that interruption?" Saïx snapped his fingers once more, and the Nobodies disappeared only for the Heartless to replace them.

"Which side are you guys on, anyway?" Sora complained.

"The Heartless ally with the strongest," said Saïx, as if the rhetorical question needed an answer. At his signal, the Heartless advanced.

“...Rrgh!” They couldn’t very well not fight something that wanted to hurt them. The Keyblade arced through the air, and the Heartless turned to light and dissolved.

And in each burst of light, a tiny heart floated into the sky.

“No—the hearts!” Sora cried, clutching the Keyblade tight.

The more Heartless he defeated, the more hearts would become part of Kingdom Hearts. And if that was exactly what Organization XIII wanted, he couldn’t let himself slay any more Heartless.

But the creatures were closing in.

“Keep going, Sora. Give us more hearts!” Saïx said by way of farewell and disappeared into a dark portal.

“But...if I can’t use the Keyblade...,” Sora murmured, his fingers still gripping it.

“Imbeciles. You can’t be trusted to do anything!”

As Maleficent’s voice rang out again, darkness spread beneath their feet, swallowing up the trio.

And then, a huge and brilliant light...

“Sora! Donald! Goofy!” Leon called, seeing a great flash from atop a distant cliff. At the same time, the Nobodies surrounding them disappeared.

“Relax. Those three won’t go down that easily,” Cloud said beside him. “The Keyblade’s chosen one... Good deal for him.”

He stowed his enormous sword against his back and walked away.

“Sora...” Leon watched the light shoot up into the sky and fade. He smiled and murmured, “We’ll meet again.”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy found themselves in pitch-black darkness. They could hardly see a hand in front of their faces, but Sora knew that Donald was sprawled on top of him, and Goofy on top of Donald.

“Ohh, ouch...” Goofy massaged his bruised behind.

“Get off already!” After Donald shoved him away, Sora could finally stand up.

Goofy scanned the darkness, although there was nothing to see in any direction. “Gawrsh, what is this place?”

“It must be the realm of darkness!” Excited, Sora started pacing. “Kairi! Riku!”

Maybe they were here somewhere. He had to try.

But there was no answer.

And then they heard faint footsteps in the distance.

Donald turned toward the sound. “Who’s there?!”

A small box had been placed on the ground. Someone was here—

they could almost see a person, but it was too dark to tell.

Donald rushed toward the box and picked it up. "What's this...?" He held the box up to his ear but didn't hear anything strange.

"Are you sure you wanna open...that?" Goofy worried. But Donald had already done so before the sentence was over.

Inside, there was a single photograph and an ice cream pop.

Sora took out the picture to examine it, peering at the four people in it.

"Gawrsh, it's the gang from Twilight Town," said Goofy. "There's Hayner, Pence, Olette...and...uh...um..."

He could only name three of them. The other was a boy he'd never seen.

But Sora said the name. "Roxas."

"You know him?" Donald asked, mystified.

"No... The name just popped into my head." Sora stared at the boy in the picture. "That's Roxas."

The wave of emotion he felt reminded him of the moment when he'd remembered Axel's name... A hint of sorrow, like he'd left something behind.

"Hmm... But we don't know him, do we...?" Perplexed, Donald picked up the ice cream bar.

"Are you sure you wanna eat...that?"

Donald popped it into his mouth before Goofy had finished the sentence. But he took it out again. "Salty! No... Sweet!"

The ice cream floated into the air and began glowing. A beam of light shone upward and illuminated a keyhole.

"Another gate's open!" Sora held up the Keyblade to release a matching beam of light. They heard the click of an opening lock.

And then brightness surrounded them.

"Huh...?"

They disappeared into the light.

Keeping his breath quiet in the inky dark, Riku watched Sora and the others from a distance. He couldn't simply tell them the answer outright, but he could give them a hint.

He really did want to see Sora and talk. But that was impossible with this appearance.

The things that mattered the most were what he couldn't tell Sora. It had always been that way.

No one would teach you the important things. You had to figure them out for yourself.

But he could hope...that Sora might discover the secret of the two objects.

Riku cloaked himself in the darkness and vanished into it.



THE LAND OF DRAGONS

CHAPTER 3

THE LAND OF DRAGONS

NAMINÉ WAS TYPING AT THE MANSION'S COMPUTER. She wasn't quite used to it yet, and slowly pecking at the letters with her index fingers took all her concentration.

"Here...?" She turned to Axel.

"Right. And then like this, see? Man, this is a pain, though."

The computer here worked nearly the same as the ones the organization had, so Axel knew how to use it to some extent. But there was still plenty he didn't get. And when they tried to look things up, they kept meeting a "*No data*" message. Apparently, it wouldn't be that simple to find out everything they wanted to know.

Naminé let out a small sigh and looked down at the sketchbook in her lap. *DiZ—no, Ansem the Wise. What is he trying to do? What is he trying to get us to do?*

Then they heard the door open. Naminé and Axel turned.

"Welcome back, Riku," she said. He had just returned from the brief meeting with Sora and his friends.

"What should we do now, Naminé?" Riku asked as he reached for the little freezer under the computer. He removed a bar of ice cream and took a bite.

"...Aw, is it good?" Axel teased. "Seriously, you're like a little kid. Even though you look like a mean old man."

Riku made no response, keeping his gaze fixed on the computer screen. The comment did rub him the wrong way. But mentally, Axel was definitely older than him by at least a little. Not that you could tell from looking.

"Axel, any idea what the organization's up to next?" he asked instead.

"Well, if I was in charge," said Axel, "I'd be working on getting Sora to replenish the ranks and destroy the Heartless at the same time."

Riku looked up from the computer. "How?"

"By finding someone really powerful somewhere and making them into a Heartless. If you pulled that off, there's a pretty good chance

it'd create a powerful Nobody. And then it'd be up to Sora to take down the Heartless, too."

Riku folded his arms. "So, do you know where 'someone really powerful' might be?"

"I know," said Naminé without turning away from the screen. "If it has to do with Sora, I know."

I can feel it. It might be faint now, but I can feel him.

"What do you mean?" Riku asked, and Naminé hung her head, uncertain how to answer.

In the sketchbook on her lap, there was a drawing of Sora and his two friends. As Riku sighed, Axel stole the ice cream out of his hand.

"There's plenty in there. Just get your own. And you call me a little kid," Riku grumbled.

At his irritation, Axel only shrugged and chuckled to himself.

When they woke up, the trio found themselves aboard the Gummi Ship, which was flying smoothly through the Other Sky.

"Oh man..." Sora's shoulders slumped. "I thought I would get to find Kairi..."

"Hmm... Y'know, Sora," Goofy said to distract him from feeling so discouraged. "The photo and the ice cream...I wonder if they're some sorta clue."

Donald picked up the thread. "Who would've left 'em for us?"

"...Riku?" Sora softly said his oldest friend's name.

"A-hyuck! Ya think so?"

"I've got a feeling..." Sora stared at the photo.

He sensed that Riku had left this picture and ice cream for them. That his friend had been watching over them this whole time.

When he thought of that, Sora's spirits rose, just a little.

"Gee, maybe you're right," Goofy said brightly.

"Look, there's the new world!" Donald dashed to the porthole. Pressing his bill against it, he could see red buildings with wide, flat roofs. "Doesn't look like anything we've seen before..."

"Hey, what if there are more Heartless? I can't use the Keyblade..." The weapon materialized in his hand, and Sora eyed it anxiously. "That would just help the organization."

"But Sora, I think ya have to use it," Goofy said carefully. "If we don't fight 'em, the Heartless'll just keep on hurting folks."

"Yeah...I guess you're right." He gave Goofy and Donald a hopeful smile. "Okay, let's go!"

His friends nodded.

The members of Organization XIII were gathered in the usual marble hall—all five of them.

This organization, formed with thirteen members, was now whittled down to only five. Xemnas, Xigbar, Xaldin, Saïx, and Luxord.

Of the Nobodies who as humans had once been Ansem's apprentices, half remained.

"So Demyx is no more. So sad..." Xigbar said flatly. Not a hint of emotion showed in his face. But that was only natural for a Nobody, with no heart to feel anything.

"And we still haven't found out where Axel went?" said Xaldin.

Saïx scowled with displeasure at the name.

Unexpectedly, Xemnas spoke up. "Everything is proceeding according to plan."

The others all turned to him.

"What we don't yet understand is the nature of the Keyblade's chosen—this Sora. Saïx, you will eliminate Axel. Luxord, Xaldin, Xigbar—I have a special task for you three."

It was a rare occurrence for Xemnas to deliver specific orders from his own mouth.

"Turn great hearts into Heartless and let Sora defeat them."

Saïx raised his head at that.

"And you know where to find suitably substantial hearts, I trust?" Xemnas went on.

The other three nodded.

"Change a great heart into a Heartless, and you might end up with an extra-useful Nobody. Leave it to our fearless leader to figure out how to replenish our personnel," Xigbar remarked with a nasty grin.

"Again, everything is proceeding according to plan," said Xemnas. "Do not let anything interfere."

With that, he stood up and summarily disappeared.

The ship landed at the foot of a mountain. Bright white snow covered about half the slope, all the way up to the peak.

It was their first time visiting this world—the Land of Dragons.

"Gawrsh, it's kinda chilly," said Goofy, gazing up at the snowy peak.

"Oh, wow! I've never seen snow before!" Sora dashed up the slope.

They climbed through wooded hills until they reached a ruined village amid the snow.

The place had been burned down deliberately, or so it seemed. The small houses were charred black, and the scorched timbers here and there told a vivid story of misery.

“This is terrible...,” Sora breathed.

Goofy kept walking into the center of the village. “Ya think the organization did it?”

Even as he said it, they caught sight of someone—a man in a black cloak, like the organization members, over at the other edge of town.

“Wait!” Sora started chasing after the figure, but another voice called out to them.

“You three!”

They stopped in their tracks and turned to see a boy with glossy black hair and fine features, slender enough that his ability to move in armor was surprising.

“Uh, sorry, can’t talk,” Sora told him. “We gotta catch that guy...”

“I’m following him, too,” said the boy.

The trio exchanged glances.

“What’s your name?” Sora asked.

“I’m Mulan—er, I mean, um...” The boy looked at the ground in apparent frustration, and then a tiny dragon poked out from behind him.

“Ping!” the dragon exclaimed.

“Hey, little guy,” said Goofy, leaning toward the dragon.

“What now? Excuse me? The name is *Mushu*! And I may be little, but I’m also lithe, lethal, and legendary! Now y’all scram before I get my dragon dander up!”

“Um...” Sora, Donald, and Goofy looked at one another again. This was an odd pair they’d encountered.

“Mushu is one of my family’s guardians,” the boy explained. “I am Ping, son of Fa Zhou.”

“How come you’re pretendin’ to be a boy?” Goofy wondered.

Ping, or Mulan, looked sheepishly at Mushu. Sora and Donald jumped in surprise.

“You’re a *girl*?!” blurted Sora.

Encouraged, Mulan grinned. “...You didn’t notice?”

“Never would’ve guessed!” Sora could still hardly believe it, peering at Mulan to see what he’d missed.

“Well, maybe I don’t have to keep it up for now,” she murmured to Mushu.

“I’m Sora,” he introduced himself. “That’s Donald, and that’s Goofy. We’re—wait, what are we doing? We gotta catch that guy!”

Mulan nodded.

Riku ran through the mountain snow and came to a rocky ridge. With a glance behind him, he let out a deep breath.

Sora saw me!

But he probably has no idea it was me in this cloak. Actually, even if he saw my face, he still wouldn't know who it was.

Still, Riku was a bit rattled—just a tiny bit.

He didn't want Sora to see him like this. But he wanted to help.

He stared at the white powder under his feet. It never snowed on the Destiny Islands. It was the first time he'd ever seen it.

It might be fun to play around in this snow with Sora.

Pretty childish, but...well, nothing wrong with that.

A hint of a smile came to Riku's face—and just then the mountainside rumbled. He looked up to see a swarm of Heartless streaming from the summit, straight at him.

In a way, he might get his wish after all.

The four climbed through the snow.

"I heard snow was cold, but it's *really* cold...," Sora mumbled, gazing up at the soaring peak.

His mind began to wander. *It could be fun to play in, though, if Riku and Kairi were here.*

Mulan was watching the summit, too. "Hmm... It looks like he got away."

"How come you're after somebody from Organization XIII?" asked Goofy.

Mulan turned to him with a blank expression. "The what?"

"The guy we just saw," replied Sora, still searching the mountainside. "He's one of them."

"The bad guys!" Donald gestured angrily with his wand.

"I knew it," said Mulan. "There's a rumor in the Imperial City about a spy in black lurking in the mountains. I was up here tracking him, but when you arrived, I lost him..."

"Sorry," Goofy had to say.

"No, don't apologize. But I wonder where he could be."

As she glanced up again, a rumble shook the mountain.

"What was that?" Mulan lowered her center of gravity.

They could see huge numbers of Heartless advancing down from the summit—straight toward them.

"Here, too?!" Donald jumped, gripping his wand, and struck out ahead.

Goofy followed. "Guess we gotta take care of 'em."

"Showtime, Mulan!" Mushu crowed, appearing atop her head. She nodded.

"Don't forget about me!" Sora ran after them.

Suddenly, he thought he heard someone call his name.

"Wha...?" He turned—and found the man in the black cloak. "It's

you!”

He held the Keyblade ready, but the man only shrugged and pointed to something behind Sora.

Without thinking, he whirled around, and the sight that greeted him was a swarm of Heartless. “Whoa!”

Apparently, they would have to take on this sneak from the organization and the Heartless all at once.

“Guys, over— Hey, where is everyone?”

He would have to act alone. Sora rushed at the man in black, and the Keyblade clashed against his opponent’s blade.

Huh...?

Something felt strange. Sora paused, mystified—but the moment he did, the man knocked him away and sent him tumbling into the cold powder. “Gah!”

He braced himself for another attack, but now there was a mob of Heartless between them.

The man in black tore through the mob toward Sora, knocking them aside.

The Heartless and Organization XIII were both enemies of Sora. But when he saw this man taking down Heartless before his eyes, he got the odd sense that maybe this one was helping *him*.

But what was that other feeling I had? What did it mean?

Sora got to his feet and dashed toward the man. “Yaaaaagh!”

But the man lightly dodged, almost as if to mock him, and Sora ended up in the snow again—this time face-first.

“Hey, what gives?!” he complained, spitting out a mouthful of wet slush, and the man beckoned him in a challenge. “You better not be making fun of me!”

Scattering the Heartless, he tried rushing the man once more. The Keyblade and the other blade met with a *clang!*

For all the fighting they were doing, the man’s breath wasn’t labored in the slightest, and he never said a word.

Something does feel strange... Wait, Sora realized. I’m fighting someone from the organization, but this is kind of...fun.

Here he was, surrounded by throngs of Heartless, trying to fight someone who seemed to outmatch him, and he was enjoying himself.

“If you think you’re gonna win, think again!” Sora slammed into the man and knocked him flat on his behind. Without losing a second, he leaped in and brought down the Keyblade, but the man rolled out of the way and jumped up with an arrogant shrug of his shoulders.

“Hey—you’re running away?!” Sora shouted, as the man sprinted back in the direction they’d come from. “This isn’t over!”

He began chasing after the man—and stopped in his tracks.

This exhilaration... Now he remembered.

It was the same as sword fighting with Riku. Like they used to do every day on the beach.

“He... No, why would he...?” Sora murmured.

That couldn’t be right. This was impossible.

Well, not impossible—but there was just no way.

And yet...

“Riku...?” Sora tried to catch up, but there was no trace of the man now.

“Sora!” Goofy called, jarring him out of his contemplation.

“There you are!” Donald came running with Mulan close behind him.

“Didja get him?” Goofy asked.

“Hmm? Oh...” Sora just gazed after the man, still distracted. “He’s gone.”

“You lost him?” Donald scolded. “Well, quit staring into space already!”

“Um...” Sora turned awkwardly to Mulan. “So, what should we do now?”

“I think we’d better get off the mountain,” she replied.

“Yeah. Okay,” Sora agreed. The other three began trudging down the slope.

Belatedly, he started after them—but not before one last look. There was nothing to be seen but a whiteout of snow. He was gone.

The mountain rumbled again, shaking under their feet. Donald peered toward the peak and jumped in alarm. “*Wak!*”

Where the swarm had appeared before, there was now one enormous Heartless. It had huge reptilian, clawed hands, with a snarling face resembling that of a guardian lion statue, and its body was covered in metal plates.

They prepared for another fight, but the Storm Rider sailed over their heads, down toward the foot of the mountain.

“It’s heading for the city!” Mulan cried, and they clambered as fast as they could through the slush down the mountainside.

At that moment, Riku was crossing swords again, this time with an Imperial Army man in the palace.

“You won’t get near the emperor!” Shang growled, but Riku took the split-second chance to thrust Soul Eater forward, and he crumpled slowly to the floor.

He had to speak to the king of this world without a moment to lose. If Shang insisted on getting in his way, Riku had no choice but to knock him out for a bit.

He became aware of the emperor’s quiet gaze and let out a breath

in relief that the man seemed not at all agitated by the commotion.

But that was only suitable for an emperor.

Riku approached the throne.

“Huh? Everything’s fine...” Sora scanned the city streets, which were perfectly peaceful.

He still wanted to find that man in the black cloak, but protecting the city was their first order of business.

“This way—to the palace!” Mulan called. “We have to warn the emperor and Shang!”

“Who’s Shang?” asked Donald.

“The son of General Li. He’s protecting the emperor now, and he’s very brave...”

Mulan’s cheeks flushed pink as she described him. Donald and Goofy exchanged a look.

“Anyway—we have to hurry!” She took off running.

They followed her through the city, but just as they were about to reach the palace gates, yet another swarm of Heartless blocked their path.

“Not again!” Donald groaned, his shoulders slumping.

“Let’s make it quick!” Sora hurtled straight into the swarm. It took only a few seconds to end the battle.

They ran across the wide stone-paved square and headed into the palace. Inside, it was unexpectedly quiet.

“Gawrsh, maybe there’s nothin’ goin’ on here after all?” Goofy scratched his head and took the lead. The others fell into line behind him.

“There he is!” Donald pointed with his wand. There, at the door to the throne room, stood someone in a black cloak.

“Stop!” Mulan shouted, and the man turned deliberately toward them.

She braced for a fight, along with Donald and Goofy, while Sora instead stepped forward.

But the man before him now, dressed in the organization’s black cloak—this couldn’t be Riku. His build and his height weren’t the same.

And yet...he’d felt it, fighting on the snowy mountainside. The *impression* of Riku.

Sora let out a tiny sigh and spoke up. “...Riku?”

The man pushed back his hood. “Nope. Never heard of him,” he said scornfully, gesturing with one hand.

A cluster of Nobodies appeared—Dusks.

As Sora held the Keyblade ready, the man simply left them to fend

off the Nobodies and disappeared into a dark rift.

“C’mon,” said Sora, his voice low.

“What made you think that was Riku...?” asked Donald.

He couldn’t get himself to answer, facing the Nobodies instead.

But that was Riku. I know it was.

Sora knew the man they’d just seen wasn’t Riku. But the one on the mountain was.

“Aw, Sora...,” Donald fretted when he didn’t reply, then shot off a spell. “*Blizzard!*”

They had Mulan and Mushu fighting with them, too, and soon the Nobodies were gone.

But Sora stared into space with the Keyblade in his hand.

If that was Riku, why is he going around dressed like the organization? Is he on their side now?

Why wouldn’t he say anything to me?

“Guess it wasn’t Riku,” said Goofy, peering at Sora with a hint of concern.

The boy only hung his head.

“Sora, hurry!” Mulan flung open the doors to the throne room. “The emperor and Shang are in danger!”

Inside, a handsome young soldier stood ready to defend a dignified old man with a white beard.

The former could only be Shang, and the latter was undoubtedly the emperor of this land.

“We saw a huge monster fly out of the mountains toward the city!” Mulan reported.

“Ah. So it is as the young stranger said,” the emperor remarked to Shang.

“What stranger?” asked Donald.

“Not long ago, we had an unfamiliar visitor steal into the palace,” said the emperor. “Shang battled with him but was quickly defeated.”

Shang’s gaze was fixed nervously on Mulan. He looked away. “To my dishonor...”

“It seems this young stranger was the man in black I’ve heard whispers about,” the emperor went on.

At that, Sora perked up. “Did he mention the name Riku?”

“He didn’t offer his name. Rather rude, in fact.”

“Rude? Then it *was* Riku!” Sora couldn’t help a little hop of joy.

Behind him, Donald and Goofy exchanged a worried glance. It was Donald who gave voice to Sora’s doubts. “Riku’s in Organization XIII now?” he whispered to Goofy.

“Gawrsh...” Goofy cocked his head.

Come to think of it, he hadn’t told Donald or Sora or even the king, but the one who’d helped him before had been in the

organization, too, black cloak and all.

So maybe that meant that Organization XIII wasn't made up of only bad people...

Goofy shook off the thought. Organization XIII wasn't made up of people at all. They were Nobodies.

"Goofy?" Donald eyed him dubiously.

Shaking his head to himself again, Goofy thought harder. If Riku was in the organization...

"What did that man come for?" Mulan asked the emperor, while the others were lost in thought.

But before he could answer, the palace shook with a terrible roar. Shang dashed to the emperor's side.

"I'll check outside!" Mulan whirled toward the door.

Shang didn't like that idea. "Mulan!"

"You protect the emperor, Shang! I'll be fine—with them!"

"Y-yeah!" Sora nodded jerkily. "That's right!"

"Oh yes, I'm aware. We need not worry while you defend us."

Sora blinked in surprise at the emperor's words. What could Riku have told him...? But there was no time to ask.

"Hurry!" Donald started moving first.

"Okay, let's go!"

They ran back up the corridor out of the throne room and opened the doors. Outside, the Heartless they'd seen on the mountain were about to wreak havoc.

The four nodded to one another and ran out into the wide square. The Storm Rider floated above, staring down at them.

"How can we defeat it?" Mulan asked, just as a fierce gust of wind swept down from the mountains.

It flung Sora into the air. "Wh-whoa!"

He wasn't actually flying, but the wind made it possible to jump much higher than normal.

"All right. Donald, use your magic! Mulan and Goofy, stop this thing from moving!"

"Got it!" Mulan grabbed on to the Storm Rider's tail as it wriggled just close enough to the ground, and Goofy in turn grabbed ahold of her, anchoring her against its writhing body.

"Here goes! *Blizzard!*" Donald let loose a spell, and the Storm Rider spun around toward him. The metal plates on its body began clashing and clanging.

"Sora! Quick!" Goofy called, hanging on to the creature's tail along with Mulan—but it flung him off, and he crashed into the paving stones.

"Goofy!" Donald ran to him, while overhead Sora clung to the Storm Rider's horns.

The boy managed to slide onto its flat forehead and gain footing, then stabbed it with the Keyblade. It thrashed its tail in pain, throwing off Mulan, and fell with a roar. Finally, it stopped moving.

“Mulan!” Sora leaped down from the Storm Rider’s head and tried to get to Mulan and Goofy. The creature flailed limply and crashed into the roof of the palace. Heavy tiles scattered every which way.

“Look out!” Sora cried—but a shadow like black lightning streaked toward them to cover Mulan.

It was Shang, letting the dangerously large tiles shatter against his armor. Then the pair got to their feet, still holding each other.

“We did it!” Sora jumped triumphantly. As he watched, the Storm Rider dissipated into light, and the freed heart rose into the sky.

Mulan and Shang stood unmoving, gazing into one another’s eyes—until eventually they realized that everyone else was watching and edged back from each other, flustered.

The trio laughed. As if their glad laughter was the cue, fireworks lit the sky in celebration.

“You have served our nation bravely. It would please me to grant you a boon,” the emperor told them, solemn and stately. “What do you wish for?”

Sora took a step forward. “The guy in black who came to see you... Will you tell me what he said?”

The emperor leaned toward him slightly. “That is all you request?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Sora’s earnestness, he nodded. “In this land, there are currents of power known as the dragon paths. They give life to both man and nature and are the source of our good fortune. But it would seem someone of evil intent disturbed one of our dragons and transformed it into what you call a Heartless. I believe that young man came to warn me of the danger, which would have allowed me to alert and prepare my troops.”

Sora wondered at that turn of phrase. “...Would have?”

The emperor chuckled. “I was about to—but then he told me the situation had changed.”

“He said a certain wacky trio had arrived, and they would take care of things,” Shang explained.

Sora looked at Donald and Goofy. He couldn’t imagine those words coming from anyone else but his old friend... “That’s gotta be Riku!” he exclaimed.

Beside him, Donald hung his head.

If he was wearing that black cloak, did that mean Riku had joined

Organization XIII?

“What’s he doin’ hanging out with the organization?” Goofy mumbled.

Sora wasn’t discouraged. “No idea. But at least I finally know he’s okay. That’s good enough.”

Good enough, he thought again.

Even if Riku was in the organization now, Sora was glad just to know that he was all right. Really, really glad.

“Now then, Fa Mulan.” The emperor turned to her. “Do you have a request?”

Mulan stared at the floor, seemingly tongue-tied for some reason. “Could Shang—I mean, the captain...”

“Go on, child.”

“Could you please grant Captain Shang a vacation?” she said a little too loudly.

“I hardly expected such humble requests...” The emperor rose from his throne, slightly nonplussed, and stepped toward Mulan. “But in this case, I’m afraid I must refuse. Captain Li’s responsibility is to protect the emperor.”

Mulan looked down again, her disappointment obvious.

“However, Fa Mulan...”

“Yes, sire!” She raised her eyes.

“Would you be willing to serve alongside him in my guard?”

“What?!” Mulan and Shang both exclaimed.

The emperor turned. “Two reeds are stronger than one. But the choice is yours.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Sounding delighted, she made an obeisance with one palm against her fist. Then she went to Shang.

As Sora looked at them together, he noticed his vision growing blurry.

“Sora...?” Goofy set a hand on his shoulder.

Donald peered into his face. “Crying for joy?”

“I’m not crying!” Sora turned away and scrubbed at his eyes. He was *not*.

There was no reason to cry when he was glad. Riku was alive.

I want to see him. I have so much to tell him.

Riku...!

Sitting down on the threadbare sofa, Riku bit into a sea-salt ice cream bar.

He and Naminé and Axel were idly passing the time in the parlor on the mansion’s first floor, each with an ice cream bar in hand.

“You’re in a pretty good mood,” Axel remarked.

Riku glanced up.

“Seeing Sora just made you that happy, huh?”

“I don’t feel like telling you.” A little smile crossed Riku’s lips as he took another bite.

“Y’know, it’s creepy when you smile with that guy’s face,” Axel said dryly, following suit and nibbling on his own ice cream.

Silence fell over the room. He paused in his munching to stare hard at Riku, then finally asked, “What is Sora to you?”

The question caught Riku off guard. He groped for words.

On the sofa opposite him, Naminé spoke up instead. “Sora and Riku are best friends.”

Axel’s eyes crinkled as he remembered his own best friend—the only friend he’d ever had, in fact.

“If your best friend goes away, you’re sad, and if you get to be with them, you’re happy,” Naminé added. “Isn’t that how it is, Axel?”

“...That’s about the size of it.” Axel nodded and sat down on the remaining empty sofa, staring at the sea-salt ice cream he held.

“So you are capable of sincerity,” said Riku.

Axel only shrugged at the jab and finished his ice cream pop.



BEAST'S CASTLE

CHAPTER 4

BEAST'S CASTLE

THE GUMMI SHIP SPED THROUGH THE OTHER SKY to the next world. In contrast to Sora's high spirits, Donald and Goofy looked despondent.

"What's Sora gonna do if Riku's really with the organization?" Donald whispered to Goofy, making sure their friend wouldn't overhear.

"Hmm..." Goofy folded his arms, frowning as he thought.

Sora poked his head in between them. "Hey, what're you guys whispering about?"

"Uh, gee..."

"Er..."

Donald and Goofy looked at each other.

"Is it about Riku?" Sora asked.

They nodded sheepishly and avoided his eyes.

"So what if Riku is in Organization XIII? It's fine."

"No, it's not!" Donald objected with a scowl. "Those are the same guys who kidnapped Kairi!"

"But he tried to help Mulan's world," said Sora. "He told the emperor that the organization was there. So he can't be working against us, right?"

"Well... Okay, but..." Donald looked down in a confused slump.

"Axel's one of them, too," Goofy said brightly. "But he helped me out."

"When?!"

Sora and Donald both leaned in close to grill him.

"You never told us that!" Donald fumed.

"When you fellas went on ahead without me at Hollow Bastion, he sorta gave me a hand," Goofy explained. He didn't sound upset about it.

Sora cocked his head. "What's that mean?"

"Beats me." Donald shrugged.

"Maybe Axel's not such a bad guy..."

Sora thought back to that feeling he'd gotten when he saw Axel.

Something familiar, something sad. He put his hand to his heart, clenching his fist there.

Hayner, Pence, Olette...and Axel.

He didn't know why, but when he thought of those four, something in his chest ached.

And Roxas.

It was different when Sora tried to think of him—his head felt foggy, and something itched at the back of his mind.

"But he's the one who nabbed Kairi!" Donald argued again.

Sora looked up at that, trying to clear his thoughts.

"But, uh, didn't he say he was sorry?" Goofy pointed out.

"Are some of them good guys and some of them bad guys...?" Donald wondered.

"Anyway, let's get going," said Sora. "Maybe we'll find out more."

The trio nodded.

Naminé, Riku, and Axel were gathered back in the computer lab, in the basement of the "haunted" mansion.

They hadn't managed to extract a single piece of useful information from the computer. Naminé let out a tiny sigh and opened her sketchbook on top of the keyboard. She'd drawn a picture of a fearsome beast. Riku peeked at it over her shoulder.

Naminé turned, looking up at him. "Someone you know?"

"Yeah...I've met him before."

The Beast had a ferociously strong heart—its strength of will alone had taken him to Hollow Bastion to save one of the princesses, Belle.

"Looks strong," Axel remarked from behind them.

"Yeah. He is," Riku said, sinking into thought.

His heart is even stronger than his body. It's exactly the kind of heart the organization wants...

"But someone that strong won't just do whatever the organization says," Naminé murmured.

"Well, this is their chance to show how persuasive they can be," Axel said with a bitter smirk.

Beside the Beast, who had once been a handsome prince, stood a man in a black cloak.

"It's time you dealt with the girl. She's scheming to take everything you have," said Xaldin, his hood pulled low to hide his face. "Your castle, your treasures...and then your very life."

The Beast hung his head. His castle was a desolate place, ruled by

a monster.

“Trust no one. Feed your anger. Only rage will keep you strong!”

“I’ve had enough of strength. There’s only one thing I want...”
The Beast gazed, unmoving, at the glass bell jar around a single red rose.

What he wanted was—

“Hah,” Xaldin spat. “To love and be loved in return? Who could ever love a beast?”

The Beast whirled again, his cape rippling. He glared and let out a roar of fury.

“Good. Let your anger rise!”

With that, Xaldin vanished.

They disembarked from the Gummi Ship and stepped into a shadowy castle hall.

“What...is this place?” Sora swiveled his head this way and that, bewildered. It didn’t look like anywhere they’d been before.

“It’s huge!” Donald waddled to the middle of the immense foyer.

“And kinda gloomy, don’t ya think?” Goofy hunched up his shoulders, a bit spooked by the dreary atmosphere, and glanced back at Sora.

“Yeah...I wonder who lives here.”

Just as Sora began to follow them, a terrible growl echoed through the castle, shaking the very air.

“Wak?!” Donald hunched up, too, his glance darting around. “What was that?”

“Hey, haven’t we heard that somewhere before?” said Goofy, cocking an ear.

Sora tried to do the same, and they heard another roar.

“Beast...?” he said softly.

“Right! It’s the Beast!” Donald hopped once in relief.

They knew that roar, after all—it was the Beast who’d fought beside them in Hollow Bastion.

“I wonder if he’s okay?” said Goofy.

They didn’t have to go far to find him. The Beast appeared on a staircase looming over the hall.

“Beast! It’s good to see you!” Sora called out cheerfully and ran up to him.

But the Beast barely spared them a glance, instead descending the stairs to pace the length of the hall as if something bothered him.

“What’s going on?” Goofy wondered. Sora shrugged. He had no idea.

Donald nervously edged closer to the Beast. “So... How’s Belle?”

The Beast only responded with a low warning growl.

Baffled, the trio looked at one another and huddled together to whisper.

“Should we go look for Belle?” Sora suggested.

Goofy had to agree. “It looks like the Beast doesn’t wanna talk to us.”

Donald nodded, too.

“Well, we’re going to see how Belle’s doing, okay!” Sora told the Beast, but he kept his back turned.

It wasn’t just the entrance hall. The whole castle was oppressively gloomy.

“It doesn’t look like there are Heartless or Nobodies here...,” said Donald, walking on tiptoe like a thief sneaking around.

They’d gone up the staircase where the Beast had come from, down some corridors, and finally arrived at a door where they could see light underneath.

“Ya think anyone’s in there?” Goofy tried to peek through the keyhole.

“Patience, please! The mademoiselle is dressing!” said a reproachful voice from inside.

Goofy jumped back.

They heard another voice. “Beast? Is that you?”

The trio exchanged a glance. “Belle!” cried Sora.

“That voice... Sora?” The door opened wide, and Belle beamed at them in her beautiful gown. Behind her was a wardrobe with a lady’s face.

“Hi there, Belle!” Sora said.

“Sora, Donald, Goofy. I’m so glad you’re here!” Belle gave them an elegant curtsy.

Then the Beast spoke from behind them. “Tonight is very important.”

Belle gazed up at him with a smile, and the Beast offered his arm. She twined her own slender arm around his elbow, and they strolled down the corridor together.

“Uh...maybe we came at a bad time?” said Goofy.

Sora nodded faintly.

It was good to see Belle and the Beast back from Hollow Bastion, home in their own world and happy together.

“Let’s see what the big deal is!” Donald followed the couple.

A few moments later, Sora and Goofy did the same.

They entered a grand ballroom.

“Hey, this isn’t too dark at all,” Donald murmured to Sora.

“And Belle seems to be having fun,” said Sora.

Goofy nodded, grinning.

In the middle of the ballroom, a middle-aged man-turned-clock bustled to and fro, along with a maître d’ candelabra, a teapot maid, and a cup who was a little boy.

They were household objects now, but they had once been the prince’s very human servants.

“What a funny castle,” Goofy whispered.

“Now then, monsieur, mademoiselle—please enjoy the evening,” said the candelabra. Then he noticed the trio of visitors. “And of course, our honored guests are welcome, too.”

Belle turned and flashed them a brilliant smile.

But an unwelcome voice rang out through the ballroom. “Think there’s room for one more?”

It was a man in a black cloak.

“The organization!” Sora faced him with the Keyblade ready.

“Don’t know when to quit, do you?” Xaldin sneered down at the trio.

“We could say the same about you!” Donald shot back, shaking his wand.

“Oh, not tonight...!” Belle sighed.

At nearly the same time, the Beast launched himself at Xaldin. “Get out!”

Nobodies appeared out of the air to block his way, but he swept them aside with a roar.

“Didn’t I tell you?” said Xaldin. “She means to rob you of everything you have.”

“Silence!” the Beast bellowed.

“If that’s how it is, I’ll have to take something you hold very dear.”

Xaldin disappeared, leaving them to puzzle over that and fend off a number of Nobodies.

“Beast, let’s take care of these things first!” Sora told him, but instead of replying, the Beast roared again and scattered the Nobodies.

“Wow, he’s strong!” Donald marveled.

“Well, we can be pretty tough, too!” Sora charged at the Nobodies in the other direction, swinging the Keyblade.

It reminded him of when they’d fought together in Hollow Bastion. How the Beast had been fighting to protect someone dear to him.

How Sora and the Beast had fought against Riku. How Riku had been back then.

He got the feeling that he'd learned a lot from the Beast.

"There!" The Nobodies were vanquished, and Sora turned to Belle—who wasn't there. "Where's Belle?"

"Over here!" she called. The clock and the others had ushered her behind a pillar, away from the battle.

"Oh! She's okay, Beast!" said Sora.

Without a word, the Beast approached her—but then he stopped in his tracks.

"Beast?" Donald said tentatively.

He didn't answer, instead tearing out of the ballroom at full speed.

"Gawrsh, what's wrong?" Goofy cocked his head.

"We'd better find out. Let's go!" Sora called to everyone in the ballroom, now considerably less pleasant than before. The trio pursued the Beast, while Belle and the transformed servants followed them.

The Beast's destination was a dismal place, illuminated only by moonlight.

"What is it?" Belle asked uncertainly as the Beast stalked in circles. "Please calm down!"

He stopped pacing to glare at her. "Calm down?! You just had to have a party, didn't you?! Don't you see what's happened?!"

"Hey, what's the matter?" Sora cut in.

"The rose... My rose..." The Beast growled in apparent agony.

Donald cocked his head. "Rose?"

"He took a rose?" asked Sora.

"Surely you can get another one," Belle said gently, trying to reason with him.

"Silence! You don't know anything!" The Beast closed in, raising a massive paw as if he might strike her.

"That's not fair, Beast. You can't take it out on Belle!" Sora chided him. "It's not like she stole it!"

"..." The Beast groaned, which sounded more like a growl, and hung his head.

"I'm sorry," Belle told him softly.

"No, you don't have to apologize," said Sora.

Unconvinced, Belle looked at the floor. "But—"

"Belle, Sora...I want you to leave the castle," the Beast said in a low voice. "Look at me. Look—this is what I am. When you first came here, I tried to change... But I was only fooling myself. I'll always be a beast. So I should live like a beast. Alone."

He turned away from her.

"You can't mean that," she pleaded.

He didn't look at her again. "Good-bye, Belle."

"Gawrsh, I think his mind's made up," Goofy whispered to Sora.

"Yeah...", Sora murmured, turning to Belle. "Look, Belle, just leave this to us. If we can get the Beast's rose back, then he'll be okay again."

Belle nodded and silently walked out of the room. The trio went after her.

The Beast was left alone with no company but the moonlight.

The castle's servants were clustered nervously outside of the room.

"Belle...", the teapot maid, Mrs. Potts, called softly to her, but Belle continued down the corridor without a word.

"Oh, how could it have come to this...?" moaned the clock butler, wringing his hands with a sigh.

"And they were so looking forward to this evening..." Lumière, the candelabra maître d', drooped sadly, his candles almost going out.

"Now, now—chins up, everyone," said Mrs. Potts, trying to be encouraging.

"Once we get the rose back, everything'll be fine!" added the teacup boy beside her, Chip.

The others nodded.

"What's so special about this rose, anyway?" Sora had to ask.

The servants all looked at one another.

"If the master can love and be loved in return, the spell will be broken," Cogsworth replied, "and we'll all be human again."

"Gee, why are you fellas like this in the first place?" Goofy wondered.

"It seems so long ago..." Lumière gazed into the distance.

"It was a cold winter's night. An old beggar woman came to the castle, asking for a night's shelter...", Mrs. Potts began as Chip nodded.

"But the prince, our master, turned her away. All because of her, *ahem*, meager appearance," Cogsworth went on.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy looked at one another. "That's terrible," said Goofy.

"*Oui*. He was a spoiled prince. So selfish and, how can I say, coldhearted—"

"Lumière!" Cogsworth cut him off sharply.

"The old woman warned our master not to be deceived by appearances. Still, he would not take her in. Isn't that how it happened, Cogsworth?" Mrs. Potts sighed.

"And then the old woman's ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress." A distant smile came to Cogsworth's face, as if

he was recalling her dazzling beauty.

"She turned the prince into a beast, a shape she thought fitting for his callous heart. And we were changed, too..."

At Mrs. Potts's recollection, the servants slumped with a collective sigh.

"And as for the rose, it is the time limit," Lumière explained despondently. "He must find his true love before the last petal falls, or we will be trapped like this for all time..."

"Ah, but that is not all," Cogsworth added. "Over the years, caring for that rose has become a cherished part of the master's daily life. It's as if all his hopes and dreams are attached to that single bloom."

With that conclusion to the tale, a mournful silence fell over them.

Sora broke it with a resolute declaration. "Then we *have* to get the rose back!"

The servants looked up at him all at once.

"Oh, please do!" Mrs. Potts nodded entreatingly.

"We can't do it without the Beast, though," said Sora. "If it's that important to him, he's gotta see it through himself."

Donald and Goofy agreed.

"Okay... I'll try to talk to him." Sora ducked back into the room they'd just left. "Hey, Beast..."

The Beast didn't even twitch. "...Leave me alone..."

"No. C'mon, listen. When we saw you a year ago, you would've given your life to save Belle. It meant a lot to us, you know. You gave us all courage. Where'd that strong heart of yours go? You're really just going to give up on everything now?" Sora said all at once.

But the Beast only stared up at the moon.

"That rose is your only hope, right? But it's not just yours. Everyone else needs it, too. Is there anything worse than living without hope? Remember what it was like before Belle came here?"

At that, the Beast's shoulders lifted a bit.

"See? You can't give up. Not now," Sora persisted. "There is still hope."

"...I know one thing." The Beast finally turned to face him. "This castle belongs to me. And that stranger has no right to be here."

Sora nodded with a determined smile. "Let's find him—and the rose!"

The Beast gave him a firm nod in return.

They hadn't seen any Heartless before, but now the castle was crawling with them.

"Where'd they all come from?!" Donald complained, brandishing his wand.

With the Beast's help, the trio took out swarm after swarm of Heartless until they finally arrived at the great entrance hall.

"So, monster, you're here after all."

The voice came from above them. They followed the sound and saw the man in the black cloak on a high window ledge, staring down at them—and holding the glass bell jar that housed the rose.

"The organization!" Sora cried.

He pushed back his hood and revealed a strong-jawed face with thick black eyebrows and sideburns, framed by long dreadlocks—all features suggested he was a man with intense drive.

"Xaldin, to be precise. You had me worried. I was afraid you'd given up for good."

The Beast rumbled deep in his throat.

"What do you guys really want?!" Sora demanded.

"Kingdom Hearts," Xaldin replied plainly. "When Kingdom Hearts is ours, we will be complete. So you see, Beast, we need your Heartless *and* your Nobody!"

"That's your excuse?!" Sora leaped up and charged at him, but Xaldin had plenty of time to dodge. He sprinted past them outside to the courtyard.

"Let's get him!" Sora cried, and they followed hot on the intruder's heels.

Belle gazed out from a second-story balcony, sighing heavily.

I know the Beast really does have a kind heart, she thought. He just has so much trouble letting it out... I know that, but it still hurts so much that he would tell me to leave.

Another sigh escaped her.

"Belle?" someone suddenly called up from the courtyard below.

She looked down to find the Beast with Sora and his friends there.

Not wanting the Beast to see her so upset, she quickly turned to go back inside, but then she saw it—the rose, right there at her feet. "Hmm?"

She carefully hefted up the bell jar with both hands and grinned.

"Look! It's the rose!"

But as she called down to them, she didn't notice Xaldin sweeping in behind her like a dark wind.

"Belle!" the Beast roared.

Xaldin covered her mouth and grabbed her by the arm. Belle tried to struggle, but she couldn't let the bell jar fall.

"Let her go!" shouted Sora.

Gathering Belle in his arms, rose and all, Xaldin leaped all the way across the courtyard, over the arch of the castle gates. From the

ground, they lost sight of him.

Belle heard Sora urging the others, “C’mon, let’s go!” and their footsteps hurrying to catch up.

Xaldin stood on the wide stone bridge leading to the castle gates. One hand held Belle captive, and the other held the rose.

“You! Get out of my castle—now!” the Beast snarled.

“With pleasure, but I’d prefer to travel light,” said Xaldin. “Which one should I leave behind? Belle or the rose?”

The Beast let out a furious roar and sprang at Xaldin. “*Belle!*”

In the same instant, Belle rammed her elbow into Xaldin with all her might—then snatched up the bell jar and ran.

“Nice one, Belle!” Sora called, making sure that she had escaped back through the castle gates as he readied the Keyblade. “Beast, let’s take care of him!”

The Beast roared in reply.

“Fools...,” Xaldin muttered. Darkness swirled around him and took shape into six lances hovering about him like a pointy barrier.

“Here I come!” Sora jumped up high to attack, but the lances moved of their own accord to defend their master, and he couldn’t get close. As they swooped and stabbed with the wind, Sora didn’t get away unscathed.

Donald tried his magic. “*Thunder!*”

“Can’t get him!” Sora groaned, on one knee as another whirlwind bore down on him.

“Sora!” Goofy scurried to him and gave him a potion.

Behind them, the Beast dealt Xaldin a heavy blow.

“Yeah! Get ’im, Beast!” Sora scrambled to his feet and dashed into the action again.

“*Thunder! Thunder! Thunder!*” Donald shot off spell after spell, trying to stop the lances, but none of his attacks reached Xaldin himself. Another whirlwind rose.

“Uh-oh! Uh...huh?”

As Sora desperately tried to brace himself, the wind turned to a cloud of black fog, passing over his head and scattering Xaldin’s lances.

Sora watched, bewildered. “What’s going on?”

“How dare you...!” Xaldin glared in the direction where the other wind had come from.

“Well, whatever!” Sora rushed at Xaldin. “Beast!”

“Sora, now!”

They took turns striking at Xaldin, cooperating to bring him to heel.

Xaldin groaned, and the instant his swift movements paused, Sora brought down the Keyblade. "Take this!"

The lances stood on end, completely still, then flared with light and vanished.

"Agh... Ahhhhhh!" Facing the sky, Xaldin screamed in agony, a sound like the last of his strength tearing from him. His body dissipated into dark wisps, and then he was gone so completely, it was like he'd never been there at all.

"We did it!" Sora punched the air. Behind him, the Beast started back toward the castle.

Belle was waiting there in the courtyard, holding on to the bell jar. She smiled when she saw him and offered the container with its enchanted red rose. "Here. It's yours again."

"Belle..."

"I know. You want me to leave." Sorrow came into her face.

The trio came running, then stopped and watched them closely. Cogsworth and the other servants were huddling nearby, too.

"No... What matters is that you weren't hurt." The Beast spoke slowly, appearing troubled. "And...I'm very grateful to you...for bringing the rose back to me."

Hearing that, Belle smiled again. "It was the least I could do before leaving," she said softly. "You've been so good to me."

"Actually...Belle..." He set the rose down on the ground and mumbled, hanging his head, as if he was struggling to say something else.

"Yes?"

He couldn't meet her eyes. He glanced at Sora and the others instead.

"Go for it!" Sora encouraged him.

"Master, tell her!"

"C'mon!"

"You can do it!"

"Go ahead!"

"This is the moment of truth!"

"Don't be bashful now!"

Lumière and Donald chimed in, followed by Mrs. Potts and Chip, Cogsworth and Goofy.

The Beast took a nervous breath and returned his attention to Belle. "I'd like you to stay here...with me. Always."

Smiling, she reached out with her right arm.

It was an invitation to dance.

He took her hand and placed his other on her waist.

Her voice was low and gentle as she answered, "I will."

The others watching broke into grins, finally able to breathe

again.

“Maestro—music!” Lumière called in a stage whisper, and a waltz began playing. The Beast and Belle twirled around the courtyard, unhurried in their happiness.



“That’s good to see...!” said Sora, still grinning, and then it happened.

A ray of light shot out from the rose and formed an enormous keyhole in the air.

Sora held the Keyblade high, and a beam streamed from it into the keyhole. The lock clicked.

“Looks like it’s time to go, then,” said Sora.

“Right!”

The trio departed from the Beast’s castle, which perhaps now wouldn’t be quite so gloomy.

High above on the castle rooftops, two more were watching Belle and the Beast dance across the courtyard.

“Guess that’s all settled, huh?” said Axel.

Beside him, Riku’s focus remained on Sora and his friends. “Yeah.”

“So, they took out Xaldin without any help from us, huh?” Axel mumbled.

“Maybe,” Riku said quietly and gave no visible reaction.

Sora and the others had managed to defeat Xaldin. But Riku had not managed to just stand there without doing anything to help.

“Well, not that it matters.” Axel’s attention was on the bridge where Xaldin had fallen. Unlike when a Heartless fell, the Nobodies of the organization turned to darkness and evaporated into nothing.

The sight was like watching his own future unfold. It rattled him.

But Axel only stretched, arching his back and shaking off the unpleasant thoughts. “What now? Head back and report to Naminé?”

He opened up a dark rift behind him.

“I wonder where they’ll be going next,” Riku murmured, watching Sora and his friends laughing together.

“That’s anybody’s guess. I’d like to at least know where *we’re* going next.” With that, Axel swept into the portal.

Riku turned away from the sound of their laughter and followed him.



DISNEY CASTLE

CHAPTER 5

DISNEY CASTLE

“ARE YOU QUITE FINISHED GIVING YOUR REPORT of how you managed to fail at *absolutely everything?*” Maleficent’s fury boomed through the halls of Hollow Bastion. “What’s more, I hear you put on airs in my absence, thinking you could take my place. Well, as of now, you’re finished. When our time comes, there will be no place for you!”

Pete hung his head. There was nothing else to do while he was thoroughly rebuked.

“Useless imbecile,” Maleficent spat, whirling to stalk out of the room.

“But—but... But I...,” Pete stammered miserably.

He’d been working as hard as he could, but all he did was fail. He didn’t know what he could do to gain Maleficent’s approval.

“For cryin’ out loud... She didn’t have to go and say that,” he grumbled. “Okay, I mighta messed up here and there. But I’m a lot more things than useless. Why, back when I was startin’ out...”

He sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

“Ohh, I miss those good old days. What I wouldn’t give to go back in time... Just go back...”

As he daydreamed, a door appeared faintly in the air right in front of him.

“...Gee, what’s this?” He tiptoed closer and examined it. From the other side, he could hear the shrill whistle of a steamboat.

“Hey! If that ain’t my old...”

Pete flung the door open and took off through it.

The Gummi Ship sailed again through the Other Sky.

Goofy leaned forward, staring out the front viewport. “I wonder what sorta gate opened this time?”

“There it is!” said Donald.

Sora leaned over, too, and saw a big white castle with blue rooftops.

Donald let out a glad “Wak!”

“Another place we’ve never been before,” said Sora, a little glum, but Donald spoke over him.

“It’s Disney Castle!”

“Disney Castle?” Sora repeated.

“Our home!” Goofy explained, just as glad.

“It is?”

“We’re back!”

Donald and Goofy hugged and danced around in celebration.

“So *that’s* where you guys come from...” Sora gazed down on the spires of Disney Castle.

The Gummi Ship touched down in the castle’s hangar.

“So this is your castle...” Sora took in the sights of this new place, although it was familiar to his two friends. “Must be nice to be home, huh?”

But Donald and Goofy didn’t seem to hear him. They were staring farther into the castle, both wearing frowns.

“What’s wrong?” asked Sora.

“Somethin’ just doesn’t feel quite right...” Goofy cocked his head.

“Uh-huh,” Donald agreed.

“Really...?” Sora tried to figure out what was amiss as two tiny figures came scurrying into the hangar.

“You’re back!” Chip and Dale scampered right up to them—urgently rather than happily. “But there’s trouble!”

“The castle’s in danger!”

“Queen Minnie needs to see you! Quick, to the library!”

Seeing their alarm, Sora, Donald, and Goofy nodded.

“Let’s go!” the boy urged, and Donald opened the door that led out to the courtyard—

“Wak!” He immediately closed it.

“Gawrsh, what’s out there? ...Yipes!” Goofy cracked open the door to peek out and did the same, slamming it shut.

They both exclaimed at the same time, “It’s full of Heartless!”

“I sure hope Daisy’s okay!”

“And the queen, too!”

“What about all the broomstick servants?”

Donald and Goofy huddled close together, talking almost too fast for Sora to keep up.

“Guys, cut it out!” He pushed them apart. “We have to go to the queen, right? C’mon!”

He opened the door himself. Just as Donald and Goofy said, the prettily pruned courtyard was overrun with Heartless.

Goofy’s head drooped in disappointment. “The castle used to be so

nice...”

“Don’t let it bother you right now, okay?” Sora gave him a friendly thump on the back and took out the Keyblade. “Which way’s the library?”

“Over there!” Donald pointed with his wand.

“Then let’s go find the queen!”

“Right!” Donald and Goofy nodded and dashed into the fight.

They battled their way through the garden and down the long corridors with Heartless at their heels. Finally, they burst into the library, slamming the heavy doors behind them.

“Your Majesty! We’re back!” Donald promptly announced with a salute.

Wearing a fine gown, the queen standing before them was a mouse like King Mickey. A crown adorned her head between the ears.

Donald and Goofy lined up together to stand at attention and give a more proper salute.

“Welcome back!” Her voice was kind and mild as she clasped her hands over her breast.

“Where’s the king?” Sora asked, poking his head between Donald and Goofy.



“And you are...?” The queen blinked at him.

“This is our friend, Sora...”

As Goofy explained, she grinned. “Oh, it’s you, Sora! The king told me all about you in his letters. He said you’re a very brave young man. I’m Minnie, the queen of this land.” She curtsied as she introduced herself.

“Nice to meetcha, Your Majesty. So, do you know where he is?”

To Sora’s question, Queen Minnie only shook her head sadly.

“Aw...” His shoulders slumped.

“Your Majesty,” Donald asked, “what are the Heartless doing in your castle?”

“Oh my... So those are the Heartless...” The queen sighed quietly, lowering her long lashes.

“Don’t worry—we’ll take care of ’em!” said Sora.

She smiled at him again. “I know I can count on you, Sora. Now, there’s something I’d like all of you to come and see. Would you escort me to the audience chamber?”

“Yes, ma’am!” At the royal request, Donald and Goofy snapped their heels together and saluted again. Half a second too late, Sora did the same.

“Oh!” Queen Minnie gasped. “I forgot to warn everyone else in the castle. We must be sure they’re hidden somewhere safe!”

“Okay, we’ll do that first,” Sora said breezily.

Donald didn’t take it as calmly. “Oh no!”

“What’s the matter?” Sora looked at him curiously.

“Well, there’s...in the castle...” Donald trailed off, as if it was hard to explain.

Goofy filled in. “*A-hyuck!* Daisy’s here somewhere!” he said with a shrug.

“Daisy? Who’s that?” asked Sora.

“She’s Donald’s special sweetheart.” Goofy chuckled.

“Really...? Donald has a sweetheart, huh?”

“*Wak!* C’mon, we gotta go tell everyone!” Donald hopped irritably as Sora gave him a teasing grin.

“We should probably split up,” Goofy suggested lightly.

“I can make sure everyone knows!” Sora was eager to get moving.

“No, you can’t. You’ll just get lost!” Donald snapped, shutting him down.

“Are you just saying that because you wanna go see your *girlfriend*?”

“*Wak!* You be quiet!” Donald shook his wand at Sora.

“Hee-hee...” Queen Minnie covered her mouth, but a giggle escaped. “I’m glad to see you’re all such good friends. Sora, would you

come with me? Donald and Goofy, you two make sure everyone is safe.”

The trio looked at one another, then all saluted in unison. “Yes, Your Majesty!”

Then Donald and Goofy hurried out of the room.

“Now, shall we?” said the queen, and Sora led her to the door.

Outside the library, the corridor leading to the audience chamber was still teeming with Heartless.

“Your Majesty, can you run?” asked Sora.

“Yes.”

The second Queen Minnie replied, Sora took off—but perhaps because of her gown, she couldn’t actually run very fast. And on top of that, the Heartless began flocking to her rather than Sora.

“Oh no—c’mon, Your Majesty!” He tried to get back to her side, but there were so many enemies that he could barely move.

And then—

“Holy!”

With that resolute cry from the queen, white light flared around her and blasted the Heartless back. The word was a chant for a spell.

“Wow, that’s amazing!”

“Let’s be on our way, Sora.” She hurried to join him. Each time the Heartless surrounded them, they managed to fend off the creatures with Sora’s Keyblade and Queen Minnie’s magic, and finally they made it to the grand audience chamber.

“Just one moment.” The queen lifted her hand before the doors. “When the trouble started, I made sure to seal this room.”

The great doors glowed, and the magical barrier fell away.

“Let’s go.” She quietly opened the door—but only found more Heartless swarming inside. “Oh, not here, too!”

“We’ve got ’em!”

They kept going just as before, fighting with the Keyblade and the queen’s spell to scatter the Heartless, making their way along the red carpet to the throne.

“Ugh, gimme a breather...,” Sora complained under his breath as the queen dashed to the throne and fiddled with something behind it.

Then the throne slid aside with a rumble, and brightness poured out from beneath it.

“Whoa...,” Sora breathed.

The light chased away all the remaining Heartless.

“The room below is called the Hall of the Cornerstone,” Queen Minnie explained, turning back to Sora. Under the area where the throne usually sat was a staircase leading down. “Our castle has

always been safe from invasion by evil worlds thanks to the Cornerstone of Light that we keep there.”

“The...Cornerstone of Light?” Sora repeated.

“This way, Sora.”

He followed her down the stairs.

The Hall of the Cornerstone was dim and gloomy, the walls overgrown with thorny vines. The tangle of brambles reminded Sora of something...

Hollow Bastion when Maleficent had ruled over it. These were just like the thorns twining through the castle back then.

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy came running down the stairs behind him.

The queen turned to them. “Did you make sure everyone knows?”

“We sure did, Your Majesty!” Goofy saluted her.

“Thank you,” she replied, then moved toward a sphere in the center of the room. It resembled a giant crystal ball, except that it shone with light from within.

“This is our cherished Cornerstone. But—the thorns...” She lowered her eyes in dismay. “This must be the work of someone evil. I don’t know what it could mean.”

Before she could speculate further, a burst of green flame rose in front of the Cornerstone.

“Wak!” Donald gripped his wand.

The green fire coalesced into a figure—a familiar one.

“Maleficent!” cried Goofy.

“Well, well, well, what have we here?” the witch drawled. “If it isn’t the wretched Keyblade boy and his lackeys!”

“We’re not lackeys!” Donald hopped in indignation.

“Yeah, why don’t you face us fair and square?!” Sora added.

“All in good time. I promise you won’t be left out of my vengeance. But you must be patient.”

“Just what are you doing here, Maleficent?!” the queen demanded.

“Ah, Queen Minnie. Radiant as always.” Maleficent gave her a polite nod, but not without a smirk. “Now, I’m here on a property venture. I want this castle for my own. Although it’s a bit too *bright* for what I have in mind. I think I’ll fill every room with my personal touch of darkness.”

She spoke with a cruel, patronizing smile.

“You’d better stop right now, if you know what’s good for you!” Queen Minnie told her.

Maleficent reared back mockingly. “Oh, how frightening. Very

well, I'll stop—after the castle is mine!”

With that, she vanished, but her parting cackle still reverberated through the hall.

“Ooh, she’s the worst.” Sora resentfully crossed his arms.

“Nothing like this has ever happened before,” the queen worried, lowering her eyes again. “I looked through all the records in the library but couldn’t find a single clue.”

“*Wak!* But there’s someone who knows lots of stuff that isn’t in books!” Donald realized with a jump.

“Oh yeah!” Goofy grinned. “Merlin the wizard.”

“Yes, that’s perfect. Merlin might know something about this mess.” Queen Minnie raised her head, determined. “Let’s ask his advice.”

“We’ll go to Hollow Bastion,” said Sora, and Donald and Goofy agreed.

With the Gummi Ship, they arrived back at Hollow Bastion in short order.

The trio ran into Merlin’s house but found no one there. “Hello? Anyone home?” Sora called.

“Merlin!”

“The castle’s in danger!”

Donald and Goofy tried, too, but only silence answered them.

Just as they turned back to one another, Merlin’s voice sounded from empty space in the room. “What is all that racket?”

With a little *poof!* of white smoke, the wizard appeared.

“Oh-ho, so it’s you three. Hmm, it seems you’ve grown a bit more dependable since I last saw you.”

“Really?!” Sora drew himself up proudly, while Donald, deadly serious, went straight to Merlin.

“There’s big trouble at Disney Castle!”

At that, Merlin’s bushy white eyebrows rose a bit. “What sort of trouble?”

“Maleficent trouble! She’s there!”

Goofy stood beside Donald. “Heartless, too!”

“Dear me...” Merlin folded his arms as Donald told him the rest.

Queen Minnie was still standing in the Hall of the Cornerstone, gazing up at the precious glowing sphere, when she thought she heard Donald’s voice from somewhere.

As she searched for the source, a puff of white smoke rose beside the Cornerstone.

"Oh my...!" she murmured in wonder.

"Wak?"

"Whoa!"

"A-hyuck?"

The trio was suddenly back in the room, this time with Merlin.

"Better to get a look for myself," Merlin said with a sly smile, peering at the Cornerstone of Light. "Mm-hmm... Interesting..."

Queen Minnie looked up at him anxiously. "What's happening, Merlin...?"

"Well, it's not good," he replied, deep in thought. "In fact, I'm afraid it's quite serious."

"What should we do?" Sora asked.

"Hrm..." Then Merlin nodded and waved his hands to cast a spell. With another cloud of smoke, a gleaming white door appeared in the corner of the room.

"What's that?" said Sora.

Merlin observed him and then the queen before answering. "*That* is a gateway to a very special world. Someone beyond that door is responsible for what's going on in Disney Castle—I'm certain of it."

As he spoke, Donald stepped closer to the gate and began knocking on it here and there.

"We knew you'd be able to help, Merlin!" Goofy joined Donald at the door.

Sora followed. "Whoever it is, we better go get 'em!"

"Now, just a moment!" said Merlin as they were about to leap through. "The perpetrators must be stopped, of course. But there is an even more important task. Somewhere in that world, there should be another door identical to this one. I believe our enemies are utilizing that other door, and as long as it remains open, the castle will be in grave danger. Sora, you must find that door, and when you do, lock it up tight with your Keyblade."

Sora listened diligently to this and nodded at the instructions. "Got it."

"Now, pay attention, all of you," Merlin said, continuing his lecture. "You are heading into a very particular world. Once you discover why, the nature of it may tempt you to do something dark. You must resist that temptation at all costs."

That made significantly less sense to Sora, who responded with a blank expression. "What's that mean?"

"You'll understand soon enough. I have faith in you lads!"

The trio nodded and returned their attention to the door. Beside them, Queen Minnie stood with her hands clasped as if in prayer. "I'm counting on you, Sora."

"Leave it to us!" he replied, and then he opened the portal.



TIMELESS RIVER

CHAPTER 6

TIMELESS RIVER

THROUGH THE DOOR, A MYSTERIOUS WORLD LAY before them—all black-and-white, no color at all.

“Huh? Oh, hey, there’s the Cornerstone of Light!” Goofy ran toward the Cornerstone perched atop a small hill.

“What’s going on?” Sora blinked at the colorless landscape. “Everything’s black-and-white.”

There was no color to be seen anywhere—not in the Cornerstone, the grass or the sky, or even the trio themselves.

“Y’know...” Donald crossed his arms, concentrating. “This is... kinda...”

“What?” asked Sora, as Donald and Goofy shared a look.

Goofy cocked his head. “Nostalgic?”

“Yeah! That’s it!” For some reason, Donald sounded excited.

“Really? So you’ve been here before?” Sora didn’t feel an inkling of nostalgia.

Whatever it was about this world, it seemed only Donald and Goofy could feel it.

“*Wak!*” Donald jumped as someone darted past, and as he gave a startled quack, the figure stopped and turned to them.

It was Pete—but somehow a little *different*.

“Hey, you!” He swaggered toward the trio. “Seen any bad guys around here?”

In reply, the three of them simply pointed at him.

“Why, I oughta...!” Pete put up his fists, and the trio likewise held their weapons ready. “Bah! I don’t have time for pip-squeaks like you. Guess I’ll go easy on ya!”

He spun and dashed away to the other side of the hill.

“There’s our suspect,” Sora remarked to the others, and they chased after the large cat.

Across the hill, they found a small pier on the bank of a lazily flowing river. Pete was milling around, stomping his feet.



“Hey, Pete!” Sora called, armed with the Keyblade.

“What’s with you squirts? You got some kinda bone to pick with me?” Pete shouted back.

“More than one!”

“I’m likin’ you less and less!” Pete marched toward them, but then they heard a steamboat’s whistle. “Huh?!” He jerked around toward it.

“Not so fast! *Fire!*” Donald let him have some magic.

“*Yeeeow!*” Pete screeched as the spell struck, hunching down on the spot. “What kinda beef d’you pip-squeaks have with me, anyway?” Rubbing his lower back, he peered up at them. “...Hey. You new around here?” he said with surprise.

“Cut the act already.” Sora shifted his shoulders and readied the Keyblade again.

Another blast came from the steamboat whistle.

“Gah!” Pete tried to stand up too fast and toppled over back on his behind. “Ooh, ow, ouch!”

Goofy cocked his head at the blunder. “Y’know... Somethin’ doesn’t seem quite right here. Are you sure you’re really Pete?”

“Course I’m Pete. Captain of the steamboat *Willie!* So stop botherin’ me, see?” he snapped, rubbing his back again. “Hit the road! I gotta find the little runt what stole my boat!”

“Gawrsh, maybe we made a mistake,” Goofy whispered.

“I’m starting to think so, too. He hasn’t even summoned any Heartless.” said Sora, looking down at the one they’d attacked.

“Sorry we pounced on ya like that, Cap’n Pete.” Goofy helped him up.

“If you’re really sorry, then go find my steamboat!” He plunked himself down on the ground again as if it hurt too much to stand up. “Ooh, my achin’ back...”

“Y-yes, sir!” Sora rushed to Captain Pete and hurriedly tended to him.

First, they went back to the Cornerstone of Light to regroup, sighing.

“I thought for sure Pete was the bad guy,” said Sora, stretching his shoulders.

“That’d be too easy.” Donald crossed his arms and tapped his foot anxiously.

“C’mon, fellas, let’s try and find that steamboat,” Goofy urged them.

The other two looked at each other.

“I guess we did sorta say we would,” Sora admitted, not particularly interested in going after a boat.

Apparently, Donald agreed. "Hey, we've got that door to find, too!"

"Right, that!" Sora nodded.

Then, after a poof of white fog, a small window was hovering right in front of them.

Curious, Sora stepped closer. Curtains hung over it, so he couldn't see through. He tried to move them aside, but somehow it seemed like he would fall through the window.

"Are you sure that's a good idea...?" Donald peered at it suspiciously.

"Let's find out!" Sora didn't wait for the others to agree before he jumped in.

Donald and Goofy exchanged a helpless look before following suit.

On the other side, there was still no color. They were inside a small house, and in the middle of the room was some kind of black hole sucking the furniture toward it. And then—they spotted the king—Mickey Mouse.

"Your Majesty?!" Donald called, but King Mickey didn't seem to hear.

"Gee, he seems kinda different somehow," Goofy mumbled.

Something about his face and movements suggested this wasn't the king they knew.

"C'mon, he needs our help!" Sora ran toward him.

Another black hole appeared, but this one spat out Heartless. As the king tried to get away, Sora took his place to battle the Heartless.

"You gotta get out of here, Your Majesty!" Goofy whacked the Heartless with his shield. It didn't take long before the trio had them under control.

"Whew..." Sora lowered the Keyblade. The king emerged from his hiding spot to grab Sora's hand and give it a hearty shake in gratitude.

"Say, Your Majesty—," Sora began, but King Mickey let go and hurried away, as if he hadn't heard at all. Sora cocked his head. "Huh...? Was that really him?"

Donald shouted from behind Sora. "Hey, look!"

He was pointing to another floating window just like the one that had brought them. Beside it hung a cord to open the curtains.

"Do we just pull on this?" said Donald before yanking the cord with all his might. The curtains parted, and the trio were flung through the window.

"Whoa!"

Bright light surrounded them, and it felt like they were floating. Then they saw two familiar faces. Maleficent was talking to Pete, who

now wore his usual outfit with its bulky pockets...

Maleficent examined the door that had materialized in the great hall of Hollow Bastion. "Fascinating. This appears to be a portal to the past!"

She seemed to have some recollection of the scene beyond the door, too.

"Yeah, it was the funniest thing..." Pete said timidly behind her.

"Stop gawking. And start thinking of a way we can use this to our advantage!"

"Yes'm...", replied Pete, trying not to hang his head yet again.

"Now, perhaps I could give you one last chance to redeem yourself."

"Oh! Thank you! You can count on me! So, what do I do?"

"Patience..." Maleficent peered through the door again. "What have we here? If it isn't the Cornerstone of Light... Hmm, with that I should be able to take the castle from those fools!"

"Castle...?" said Pete, confused. She already had a castle.

"The castle where that wretched little king lives." Maleficent turned to Pete with a devious smirk.

When they came to, Sora and the others were standing back on the hill beside the Cornerstone.

Somehow, that window must have given them a peek at what Maleficent was up to—as if it had taken them to a different world. But now the window was nowhere to be seen.

"What was that...?" Sora wondered.

"It was Maleficent!" Donald shook his wand in the air.

"You guys saw it, too?"

"Yup. So, if that door's connected to the past..." Goofy pondered.

"No, no! It's connected to *here*!" said Donald.

"Huh? How?" Sora crossed his arms.

If the door Maleficent had seen was connected to the past, as well as where they were now...

"That means we're in the past?!" Goofy blurted.

"And Maleficent was talking to Pete."

"So he tricked us!" Donald realized furiously.

"Somethin' still doesn't seem right, though..." said Goofy.

"Hmm...", Sora thought aloud. "The Pete we met here was a little rough around the edges, but he didn't seem like a bad guy..."

Then a cackle from Pete echoed across the Cornerstone hill. "Now that castle's as good as ours!"

But it wasn't Captain Pete—it was a more familiar Pete.

“The culprit!” Donald pointed straight at him as Pete took off toward the river.

“Oh no! The Cornerstone’s gone!” cried Goofy.

Sora whirled around, and it was true. The Cornerstone of Light had disappeared. He gripped the Keyblade. “Pete must’ve stolen it!”

Donald stamped his feet in aggravation. “That means... The castle...”

“They’re gonna fill it with darkness!” Goofy finished.

Just then, they caught sight of Pete again.

Sora held the Keyblade menacingly. “Hold it right there!”

“No way, small fry! I finally found the chump what stole my boat!”

This time it was Captain Pete, with his odd hat and his pants held up by a single suspender.

“Yeah! It was you!” Donald retorted.

“Right, me!” Captain Pete paused. “Wait—no, it wasn’t me! Just somebody who looks like me!”

“Sheesh, this is confusing...” Sora scratched his head.

“Just hurry up and get my steamboat back!” Pete practically begged them.

“Okay! We will!” Sora dashed toward the river with the others.

There was a small steamboat moored at the pier.

“There she is!” Captain Pete ran toward the boat. A wooden cage sat on it—and inside was the Cornerstone of Light. “Hey, wait!”

“Shut up!” The other Pete stood at the helm, about to cast off. “Your future’s on the line here, pal, so back off and lemme have this boat!”

The steam whistle blew. The trio followed Captain Pete as he tried to run after his boat.

“We have to get the Cornerstone!” Sora leaped from the riverbank onto the deck.

“What—you again?!” the bad Pete shouted without taking his hands from the wheel.

“That boat’s mine, and you’re gonna give it back!” Captain Pete managed to jump aboard, rocking the boat with his weight.

“Whoa!” The bad Pete stumbled.

Goofy lost his balance, too, but he didn’t recover and crashed into the boat thief.

“Goofy!” As Pete tumbled overboard, Sora grabbed his friend by the belt before he met the same fate.

“Wh-whooooo!” Pete hit the water with a tremendous splash.

“Ha! We did it!” Sora punched the air as their enemy, thwarted,

made it to the riverbank and scrambled away.

"Gee, that wasn't too hard," Goofy murmured, watching him run off.

"You're gonna pay for that!" Captain Pete jumped off the boat again and chased after his double.

"Pete from this world is right. Let's get him!" said Sora. The trio followed suit.

On the wharf facing the hill, they found the two Petes in a fistfight.

"Which one's which...?" Donald muttered, circling the pair.

"C'mere!"

"Wanna piece of me?!"

Captain Pete took a punch and went reeling. "*Ouuuch!*"

"Heh. You're still wet behind the ears!" the bad Pete taunted him, preparing to make another break for it.

"Why, you!" Captain Pete stuck out his leg to trip his opponent.

"Oof!" It worked. Pete tumbled into the dirt—but he didn't stay down. "Hmph!"

Except Sora, Donald, and Goofy were now in his way.

"Our turn!" Sora rushed him with the Keyblade.

"*Guh!*" the bad Pete grunted, stumbling dizzily.

Donald was waiting with a spell. "Take this! *Thunder!*"

"Here goes!" Goofy charged and knocked Pete flat on his behind.

Captain Pete scowled down at his unpleasant double. "Serves ya right!"

"So, the Pete here wasn't doin' anything wrong," Goofy whispered to Sora.

"Well, that's good, isn't it?" Sora grinned.

"I'll get you twerps! Just you wait!" Pete stood up again and waved his arms around. With a flash of light, a great door appeared in front of him.

"There it is!" Donald exclaimed as the bad Pete wasted no time jumping through it.

"And *stay* out!" Captain Pete hollered after him.

"Sora!" Donald prompted.

"I'm on it!" Sora held out the Keyblade and locked the door up tight. "That should do it."

"Yeah!" Goofy gave him a high five.

"I don't get a lick of what's goin' on here. Who was that creep, anyway?" Captain Pete grumbled and stretched, cracking his back, then gave the trio a grin and a thumbs-up. "Aw, never mind. Sorry to put you kids to all that trouble."

"Well, you're gonna make more trouble for us later!" Donald

retorted with a hop.

“What’re you talkin’ about? I’m tryin’ to thank ya. How about a ride on my steamboat?” Pete swaggered toward the pier in high spirits. “I’ll even let ya pilot. My deckhand Mickey’s late, anyway.”

“Mickey... Wait, the king?” Sora cocked his head.

“No, the Mickey in *this* world!” said Donald.

So this world’s Mickey was a different person from King Mickey? Just like the Pete they were talking to now and the Pete they already knew were different?

“What’re you standing there jabbering for? C’mon, get aboard!” Captain Pete told them.

The trio hurried after him.

The steamboat *Willie* floated through the black-and-white world of Timeless River.

Naturally, Sora was piloting, while Donald occupied himself with sounding the big whistle.

On the deck behind them, the Cornerstone of Light glowed. Behind that, Mickey lazed against the stern, whistling softly, unnoticed.

“Whew!”

They had returned the Cornerstone to its spot on the hill.

Goofy gazed up at its brightness. “Now the castle’s gotta be safe, right?”

“Yeah,” Sora agreed. “Guess we should head back.”

Donald snuck a few glances around. “Aw, c’mon, as long as we’re here in the past—”

“Donald!” the other two said at once. Before he could run off to cause mischief, each grabbed a feathery arm and tossed him through the door.

“*Wak!*” he protested. Sora and Goofy only left once they saw him hit the floor on the other side.

“Oh, the thorns are gone!” Queen Minnie exclaimed in wonder as the thorny vines glowed and faded away and Disney Castle returned to its usual bright splendor.

“The lads must have accomplished their mission,” said Merlin, stroking his beard.

“Hooray!”

“Time for a party! An acorn feast!”

Chip and Dale danced around in celebration.

Then Donald came tumbling through the door, landing on his behind in front of everyone. A moment later, Goofy and Sora arrived.

“Welcome back!” Queen Minnie nodded to them. “With your bravery, the castle is safe again. Thank you so much for all you’ve done.”

“Good work, guys!” Chip and Dale chorused.

“Now, lads, I hope you didn’t do anything reckless while you were there?” Merlin said, but his eyes fixed squarely on Donald.

“Of course not!”

He sprang to his feet, and Sora and Goofy could hardly contain their laughter.

“Hey! What’s so funny, you two?!” Donald protested—and then a lady, another duck like him, entered the Hall of the Cornerstone. He jumped. “Daisy!”

She batted her long eyelashes and smiled at him. “Donald!”

“Wak!”

Her tone sounded less than pleased, and he took a step back.

“You forgot about our date again!” Daisy scolded. “I hope you have a good excuse!”

“But, Daisy, I...” Donald kept nervously backpedaling, and she kept closing the distance.

“I know you’re on an important mission, but you could at least check in every once in a while.”

Donald silently pleaded for help, but Sora and Goofy pretended not to notice.

“Well, Donald?” Daisy stalked up right in front of him.

“Er...” His gaze landed on the door. If he could just get back through...

Merlin knew what he was thinking. “Donald!”

“I’m sorry!” Donald tried to sprint for the door.

Daisy just barely managed to catch him by the tail. “Going somewhere?”

“Sorry!” He pulled himself out of her grasp and ran.

“Donald!”

He scampered all over the hall with Daisy hot on his heels.

“He’s gonna be fine, right?” said Sora.



As everyone else giggled, the Cornerstone of Light began to shine even more brightly. The brilliance focused into a single beam and formed a keyhole in the air.

“Another gate...” Sora released the ray of light from the Keyblade, and they heard the lock click open. “Donald, Goofy... I think it’s time to go!”

“I think you’re right,” Goofy replied. “But...uh...Donald...”

Daisy had caught him in a corner, where his feet were flailing desperately.

“Daisy, we need Donald for just a little longer,” said Sora.

She tilted her head dubiously. “Just a little? Really?”

“Um...uh—well...,” Sora stammered.

“I’ll be back soon, Daisy!” Donald promised her. She relaxed her hold and he escaped.

“Oh, all right,” Daisy relented.

“Don’t you worry, Your Majesty. We’ll come back.” Goofy grinned to Queen Minnie.

“Please tell the king we’re still looking for him!” Sora added.

“I will!” The queen nodded firmly.

“See you!” Chip and Dale waved.

“Take care and think wisely,” said Merlin.

The trio nodded to them and bid their farewells to Disney Castle.



PORT ROYAL

CHAPTER 7

PORT ROYAL

IT WAS TOO QUIET IN THE MANSION.

In the white room, Naminé's art came to life in her sketchbook.

"Whatcha drawing?" asked Axel from across the table. He looked bored, resting his elbows on the tabletop.

"It's a secret."

"Oh." He watched Naminé concentrate on her art. He'd done the same thing back in Castle Oblivion.

She had changed a lot since then. But he got the feeling that he had, too. If someone asked him whether that was for better or worse, he'd probably be able to say it was for the better.

"Riku's taking a long time," said Naminé, pausing in her work as if she'd noticed Axel's observation. "I don't sense Maleficent there anymore, so he ought to be back..."

Riku had followed Sora to Disney Castle, and he was still there.

"He worries too much. Thinks he has to help Sora do everything..." Axel grimaced in irritation.

"But, Axel, aren't you the one worrying about Riku and Sora?" Naminé giggled softly.

"Me, worry? You think I need to be worried about those two?" He stretched backward and rocked the chair back and forth, like a restless child.

Naminé returned to her sketchbook.

"Say, Naminé... Are you still going to try to meet Kairi?"

Her head snapped up at the unexpected question. Across from her, Axel met her gaze, grave and earnest.

"I have to help her," she said with a sad smile.

He scowled. "Is that really the best thing?"

"The best thing...?" Naminé set her crayons down on the table, her gaze dropping as she thought for a moment, and then she smiled at him again. "It's the right thing."

In response, Axel only leaned back and rocked in the chair again. She took up her crayons.

No one could know what was right or wrong.

The picture she was drawing depicted herself and Riku and Axel, too, smiling brightly.

After Disney Castle, the next place they came to was a dimly lit town. A huge full moon shone down on the brick buildings.

“Where are we?”

“Gawrsh, looks like another world we haven’t been to before.”

Donald and Goofy took the lead. Sora walked more slowly, recognizing the scent of the air around him and the soft sound...

The smell of the sea and the lapping of waves.

He broke into a run past Donald and Goofy to where the cobbled streets ended and found a view he knew well—only a little bit different.

“Wow...” Donald arrived beside him to take in the scenery, too.

The water was dark here, a deep black under the moon, unlike in the Destiny Islands. Or Neverland.

“This place is...,” Sora murmured.

“Really somethin’...,” Goofy finished, also staring out at the sea.

They’d been to seascapes before on different worlds. But nothing quite like this.

“I’ve never seen an ocean like this,” said Donald, looking up at Sora.

Then they heard a scream.

Sora turned around. “Something’s up!”

“Organization XIII?” Goofy’s ears perked up at the sound.

“Or the Heartless!” added Donald.

“Only one way to find out!” Sora took out the Keyblade and dashed toward the commotion.

At the harbor, a woman was surrounded by a group of men, who noticed the trio’s intrusion and turned.

“Run!” Sora shouted to the lady. She darted away to hide. With the clouds shrouding the moon, he couldn’t see the men’s faces very well, but they were advancing toward him with weapons drawn.

“Whoa!” Sora blocked a blow from a hatchet and pushed the man back, then swung the Keyblade. But the strike did no more than make the man lazily rub at his head. “The Keyblade doesn’t do anything to them?!”

Behind him, Donald closed in and beat the man over the head with his wand. “Take that, and that, and that!”

Still, the man didn’t seem to feel any pain.

“Wak?” Donald took a step back and tried a spell. “*Fire!*”

Even magic had no effect.

"That's not going to work, you know," someone called from out on the water.

The trio turned to see a lone man standing on a ship in the harbor. A bandanna kept his long hair back from his face. Something dark was painted under his eyes, and he had an unsavory look to him.

A glance was enough to show he was disreputable.

"Who are you?" Sora demanded as he parried with the Keyblade.

"Captain Jack Sparrow, if you please. Pirate extraordinaire."

"Pirate?!" Sora repeated.

"Pirate. Though the fellows you're fighting there are also pirates." Jack hopped down from his boat and knocked Sora's current opponent aside with a swing of his sword. But just like when the Keyblade struck them, it didn't appear to do any damage.

Jack shrugged. "Awful hardy."

"What do we do?!" cried Sora.

Then the wind rose, sweeping away the clouds, and moonlight poured down on them.

"*Wak!*" Donald jumped at the sight—under the silver light, the men attacking them turned to grisly skeletons.

"What *are* they?!" Sora practically yelled.

"Oh, they're just undead is all," Jack replied, as if this were completely normal. "Why don't we show 'em how alive we are, er—what's your name again?"

"Sora!"

Jack smirked and readied his sword. "Here goes, Nora!"

"It's Sora!"

Ignoring him, Jack charged at the skeletons and began hacking away. "A little assistance, Dora?"

"That's *Sora!*" But the boy heeded the request and charged after him. In the moonlight, the skeletons weren't all that strong.

"Well, that takes care of that." Once the threat was defeated, Jack turned to the trio with a devious grin.

"But what's wrong with them?" asked Donald.

"They're pirates under a curse. Not among the living, and yet they can't die—so they'll go on wandering the seas forever," Jack said with a ghost-story voice, trying to frighten them.

It only made Sora curious. "How'd this happen?"

"Cursed Aztec gold, lads. Greed got to them, and then so did the curse. Only way to break it is to return every last gold piece to the chest they came from."

"And then they won't turn into those ghosts?"

"You're a quick one."

The trio exchanged a look, and then another voice intruded. "You

there! Gentlemen!"

It was the woman they had found among the pirates earlier.

"I need your help," she said.

"I don't care for the smell of this..." Jack shrugged and turned away.

The woman with beautiful honey-blond hair ran to the trio and explained. "My name is Elizabeth. With those cursed pirates prowling about...my dear friend Will went to Isla de Muerta to check on the treasure and find out why."

"Isla de Muerta?" asked Sora.

"That's the island where the Aztec treasure is hidden," Elizabeth replied before Jack could. "Jack, I fear something's happened. You have to take me to him."

"Aye, there it is." Jack shrugged again. "If you'll be wanting him rescued, best do it alone, lass."

Apparently, Elizabeth and Jack already knew each other.

"Really, Jack? Me, alone? Sail to the island and take on the cursed pirates?"

"Well, if any lass could... But I see no reason why *I* should rush into all that," Jack remarked.

"I was the one who had the idea of going to Isla de Muerta to investigate. But Will insisted that I stay behind," Elizabeth went on. "I can't just sit and wait—I've got to know if he's all right!"

"Wonder why he insisted on that," Jack murmured to the trio.

"Please, Jack, you've got to take me to him!" Not waiting for an answer, she started toward the docks.

"Hold on," Jack called after her. "I see no profit in it for me."

She paused, turning back to flash him a smile. "I shall reward you, of course. As much as someone who isn't a pirate can."

"Right, then. Shall we?" Jack winked to Sora and the others and then waved Elizabeth on toward his ship.

At the sound of Riku's footsteps, Naminé looked up from her sketchbook. The door to the white room in the haunted mansion opened, and he came in.

"Welcome back," said Naminé. Across from her, Axel was still nervously rocking the chair and eating a sea-salt ice cream.

"Naminé, where did Sora head next?" Riku wanted to know as soon as he could. He moved briskly to peer over Naminé's shoulder at her sketchbook, where he found a drawing of a ship. "Where is this...?"

"Shouldn't we be trying to help Kairi?" Axel interjected without moving from his perch.

A tiny tremble went through Naminé. She hadn't imagined he would be the one to bring it up. Not when he was so opposed to Nobodies meeting their somebodies and disappearing.

"...How? Do you have an idea?" asked Riku.

"Yup. I'm going to betray you two," Axel replied with a smirk.

Riku shifted. "I'm not following."

"They think you and Naminé are the wrench in their works. So, I'm going to tell them where you are."

"You're going to make it *look* like you're betraying us. You really think that'll work?" Riku folded his arms and mulled it over.

"If I go back into the fold, I'll be able to come and go to their castle whenever I want. Then it'll be a cinch to get Kairi out."

At Axel's explanation, Naminé looked up for a moment and then ducked her head again.

Kairi... Yes, I want to meet her.

I want to meet her and return to her heart... Well, no, I have to.

But...

Riku spoke as Naminé hesitated. "What should we do in the meantime?"

"You fight off whichever organization member comes here," Axel told him. "You were able to defeat Roxas. You can handle any of the others, except Xemnas. There are only four left, but one of them is probably trailing Sora right now. And I seriously doubt Xemnas would come all the way out here himself. So you'd be up against Saïx or Xigbar. Or Luxord. And you can take any of them. Once there's one less member in the castle, I'll come back with Kairi. How's that for a plan?"

He gave them a confident grin, but Riku's expression remained stony.

"Are you sure you can pull that off?"

"You could pretend to have a *little* faith in me." Axel rolled his shoulders back.

"I don't. No matter what you believe, I don't have much faith that a guy who let Kairi get kidnapped out from under his nose, lost a fight, and nearly disappeared is going to be strong enough for this." Riku let out a small sigh.

It wasn't terribly likely, but in the event that Axel did have to face Xemnas in combat, their odds of rescuing Kairi would dwindle to zero. Actually, he didn't think Axel could beat the other remaining organization members, either.

"Well, can you think of a better way to save her?" asked Axel.

Riku had no answer.

Axel stretched his neck and munched on his ice cream. "You know, I don't mind disappearing."

Naminé's breath caught.

Riku stared at him.

"Roxas is gone. When we bring Kairi here, Naminé will be gone, too. So, same for me," he said, as if he were discussing the weather, and then punctuated his comment with another bite of sea-salt ice cream.

"We don't disappear... We're only reborn," Naminé murmured, perhaps to herself.

"I'm not like you and Roxas," Axel said flatly. His hand holding the ice pop stick paused in midair.

"But—but you..." She looked down, clenching her fists.

"It's because I don't have a heart," Axel went on. "I don't *want* to disappear, but I'm not upset or sad about it."

Naminé tried to say something and failed.

Nobodies aren't supposed to exist. Nobodies don't have hearts, so they can't feel anything.

No... We couldn't feel anything.

Until we met Sora. And Roxas, his Nobody.

Why can't the rest of them see that?

Sora was special. And so was Roxas, but he was gone. He'd returned to Sora's heart.

But why did that have to mean it was okay for Axel to disappear, too?

Still hunched over to hide her face, Naminé shook her head.

"Okay," Riku told Axel. "We'll follow your plan."

"Riku..." she began.

But he didn't waver. "If it starts going bad, just run for it. You're pretty fast, right?"

Axel grinned at that. "Well, faster than you, anyway."

He bit into his ice cream and stood, then opened a rift into the darkness.

"Axel!" she cried, jumping up to run after him.

"Don't worry, Naminé. I'm the fastest the organization had. If I run, they'll never catch me. Got it memorized?"

She stopped short and nodded.

"See you." Holding the ice cream pop in his mouth, he stepped into the rift.

A tear rolled down Naminé's cheek as she watched the darkness close around him.

Once they were aboard, no one said much. But Elizabeth did speak enough to tell the trio that the harbor town they'd just come from was called Port Royal.

Jack's ship glided through the dark waters as they gazed out at the scenery for a while.

From up at the bow, Goofy broke the silence. "Hey, there's another ship out there!"

"Where?" Donald hurried to join Goofy at his vantage point. Jack, with his hands on the helm, steered toward the other ship they saw.

"Will!" Elizabeth cried, pointing off the bow. There was a man on the other ship slumped over the rail, unconscious.

Jack brought his ship alongside it and prepared to board.

"We've got to rescue him!"

At Elizabeth's cue, they jumped from one deck to the other.

"Gently there," Jack called.

They nodded. Sora and Goofy hoisted Will up between them. "He's breathin'! Thank goodness!" said Goofy, relieved.

"Will! Wake up!" Elizabeth begged, but he didn't respond.

"Why don't we get him into the captain's quarters for now," Jack suggested, and they carefully carried him inside.

In the stateroom, Elizabeth cradled Will's head, repeating his name. She tried patting his cheek. Sora and the others watched close by.

"Come on now!" She peered urgently into his face.

"...Elizabeth...?" Will opened his eyes, just barely.

"What happened?"

"I... That's right...", Will began. "I persuaded the Royal Navy to come to Isla de Muerta, and... The medallions, the entire chest—someone took the lot. The next thing I knew, we were attacked... But I couldn't see who it was. His face was shrouded in a dark hood."

"The organization!" Sora exclaimed. Goofy and Donald exchanged a glance.

"We found a way out of the cave... But the villain sent a terrible creature after us. Never seen its like before. I think I'm...the only one who made it back to the *Interceptor*."

Will winced as if recalling the fate of the crew. His face, already pale with exhaustion, lost even more color.

"Will..." Elizabeth couldn't help clutching him tight.

"Elizabeth... I feel rather..." His eyes closed and his breathing slowed. He was asleep again.

"Sounds like we're up," said Sora. Donald and Goofy nodded at his resolve.

Elizabeth gently set down Will and got to her feet. "The entire crew of a Royal Navy brig... What kind of monster is this?"

"Let's go to this Isla de Muerta and find out!"

She had to agree.

“Pardon me, lady and gentlemen, but your captain will have no part of monsters today, and his ship will be heading back to port.”

“Running away? Just like that?” Elizabeth demanded.

He neatly dodged her attempt to shame him and went back to the deck. “Just like that.”

She turned to Sora. “Please...can you convince him?”

“We’ll try.” Sora ran out after Jack.

Above deck, the trio found that Jack’s ship was already moving.

Donald hopped up beside the helm to ask, “Where are you going?”

“Back to port. Like I said.” Jack spun the wheel hard.

Sora dashed over and grabbed it. “It’s Organization XIII! We’re after them!” he explained, looking up at Jack, who shrugged and wordlessly nudged him away from the helm. “Jack, c’mon—”

“Listen, lad, this is the only honesty you’ll get from a pirate: I don’t care. Wait...” He broke off and frowned, shading his eyes. “Don’t remember invitin’ *you* aboard.”

“Huh?”

“Wak?”

There was a man standing at the prow. He gazed straight at them as his black cloak fluttered in the sea breeze, although they couldn’t see his face well beneath his hood.

And in front of him sat a treasure chest full of gold medallions.

“He’s from the organization!” Sora gripped the Keyblade, and beside him Jack drew his sword.

“The darkness in men’s hearts, drawn to these cursed medallions...and the Heartless, a veritable maelstrom of avarice,” mused the cloaked man. “I wonder, which of you is worthy of serving Organization XIII?”

He waved his one hand in the air to summon something—an enormous Heartless, the Grim Reaper.

It held a huge ax, swinging like a pendulum, and it hovered on a single leg overhead. Something resembling a second face sat on its shoulder.

“You need an answer now?” Jack said reluctantly.

“Indeed, I do!” the man replied, and the Grim Reaper came swooping at them.

Jack heaved a sigh. “No monsters today, I said...”

“Well, let’s get rid of it!” Sora leaped at the Grim Reaper.

“Of course. I’m not about to stand by and let monsters rampage about *my* ship.” Jack wasn’t far behind.

Ten of the thirteen chairs were now empty. In the occupied three sat Xemnas, Xigbar, and Saïx.

“We’re down to Luxord?” said Xigbar, watching Xemnas for a reaction. When he received none, he kept talking. “Have to wonder if he’ll manage, up against Sora...”

Everything they’d tried so far had ended in failure. At this point, it was fair to say they were in dire straits.

Xigbar turned to the other remaining member. “What’s happening with Axel?”

“I can’t find him,” Saïx replied, his scarred brow darkening with a frown.

“Were you looking?”

Just as Xigbar raised the question, Xemnas looked toward the entrance to the great hall. “He’s returned.”

Xigbar and Saïx followed his glance, and there stood number 8—the Flurry of Dancing Flames, Axel.

“Good to be back.” With a smile curling his lips, he approached them and settled into seat number 8. He held a half-eaten ice cream pop. Pale blue sea-salt ice cream.

“What are *you* doing here?” The Claymore materialized in Saïx’s hand. “Foul traitor—”

“No, Saïx,” said Xigbar, glaring hard at Axel.

“What have you come for?” With rage barely contained under every word, Saïx stalked toward Axel.

“Well, if I stay out there, Sora’ll get me, too. Anyway, it looks like you’re having a personnel shortage. How are you gonna get ahold of Kingdom Hearts like this?”

Xemnas smiled as Axel taunted them. “There is a reason you’ve returned,” he said quietly.

“Bingo.” Axel leaned toward him. “I’m here to tell you where Naminé is. So, how about letting me back in the clubhouse?”

“You really think we’d believe that? We know you’ve been working with Naminé and that other boy,” said Saïx, as if it were an interrogation, and took his seat.

“Yeah, well, now I’m betraying them.”

Xemnas began chuckling at Axel’s overconfident declaration. “Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh...”

“Xemnas...?” Xigbar frowned nervously.

But he didn’t stop laughing. Xigbar and Saïx looked at each other.

“Very well.” Finally, Xemnas stifled his laughter, though he still sounded intensely amused. “You’re reinstated into the organization.”

“But—!” Saïx jumped to his feet again.

At that, Xemnas’s smile disappeared. “Silence,” he growled, returning his attention to Axel. “Where are Naminé and the boy?”

“The haunted mansion in Twilight Town.” Axel stuck the last of the ice cream pop in his mouth.

Xemnas narrowed his eyes. “Oh...?”

“I’ll go.” Saïx started walking as if he couldn’t wait to leave the scene.

“Wait, Saïx. I will go.” Xemnas stood.

“Ha! We did it!” Donald crowed as the Grim Reaper fell away into the sea.

“Not over yet!” Sora closed in on the man who had been watching the fight from the prow.

Completely unruffled, the man removed his hood, showing his smartly trimmed platinum blond hair and beard, as well as a conceited smirk as he stared at Sora and the others.

“Toss him overboard,” Jack muttered.

“Aye-aye!” Sora stepped closer, Keyblade in hand.

“Parley!” Luxord said suddenly. The word was unfamiliar to Sora’s ears.

“What was that?!” Jack caught Sora by the collar and pulled him back.

“Hey, what gives?!” Sora protested.

“It’s a bit of a pirates’ code,” Jack explained. “Anyone who invokes parley must be granted a chance to negotiate.”

Sora squirmed, shouting, “This is no time for negotiating!”

“Have to agree there. But that’s the code. Take it up with the fool who thought of it.”

“Shucks...,” said Goofy, feeling thwarted.

Still restraining the struggling Sora, Jack observed Luxord. “All right, you. Out with it.”

“I surrender the chest with my humblest apologies.” Still smirking, Luxord pointed to the treasure chest.

“Rather accommodating of you, mate. And for that you want...?”

Sora finally stopped wriggling, and Jack dropped him to the deck. He scowled up at the pirate captain.

“Just a souvenir... For the memories,” Luxord replied.

“What?” Jack said suspiciously, just as Luxord grabbed a medallion from the chest and tossed it into the air.

“Oh no! We can’t break the curse unless we got all the medallions!” Goofy jumped after the one that tumbled to the deck—but a Nobody had appeared to snatch it up.

“Our friend’s about to learn what it means to cross a pirate.” Jack eyed Luxord darkly, clutching his sword.

“Oh?” Luxord taunted, leaping onto the navy brig beside them.

“We can’t let him get away!” Sora moved to follow him, but the Grim Reaper—which they thought they’d defeated—rose up out of the water in his path and attacked.

“It’s a ghost!” Donald squeaked. With the curse of the Aztec gold, it had taken on a form even uglier than before.

“Long as the thing’s cursed, it won’t be inclined to stay dead,” said Jack with his sword at the ready.

“Then we have to get the medallion back!” Just as Sora was about to leap onto the other ship, a fierce gust of wind threw them flat on the deck.

At the commotion, Elizabeth and Will emerged from the stateroom. “Jack?!”

“Get on inside, you two!” Jack shouted at them over the raging wind.

The gale blew furiously enough to pick up the gold pieces from the chest, and as they whirled through the air, the Grim Reaper swallowed them.

“Uh-oh! The medallions!” Goofy tried to chase them.

Swaying in the wind, the Grim Reaper floated away, and the ship with Luxord aboard followed it.

“Where’s the chest?” Jack scanned the deck for it.

“He took it with him!” Goofy wailed, collapsing hopelessly.

Meanwhile, Donald was clinging to the wood. “*Wak...*”

“Are you okay, Donald?” asked Sora.

“...Yeah...” He stood up and opened his fist.

Sora peered at the gleam in Donald’s palm. “A medallion!”

“What’s that now?” Jack sauntered over to them—just as the moon emerged from a bank of clouds.

“Jack!” Elizabeth said his name in a horrified shriek.

“Hmm?” He looked down at his hand and shrugged. He’d become a gruesome skeleton himself.

“The curse!” cried Sora.

Jack glanced sidelong at Donald. “Likely on account of you takin’ a medallion.”

“*Wak!* That’s not fair!” Donald objected. “I didn’t steal it. I saved it from falling into the water!”

“We need all of the gold pieces to break the curse,” Jack said with a frown.

“And if we lost one in the ocean, it’d never break!” Sora added brightly.

Goofy cocked his head. “But *we’re* not all skeleton-y.”

“Is it ‘cos we’re not from this world?” said Donald.

“Right...” Sora looked away. “Always just passing through. Wonder when I’ll get to go home again...”

“Sora...,” Goofy said gently.

He recovered with some bluster. “Ha, just kidding! Lucky the curse doesn’t work on us, huh?”

“Enough yammerin’, mates!” Jack shouted over them. “We’d best get to followin’ that ship!”

“What’s he heading for?” Will crossed his arms, staring off after Luxord.

“Is it Isla de Muerta...?” Elizabeth murmured.

“Probably Port Royal instead,” suggested Sora.

“Why’s that?”

“Organization XIII is after people’s hearts. So they’ll go where there’s lots of people.”

Donald and Goofy agreed with him.

“He’s going to hurt the townspeople?” said Will.

“You think he’ll bring ’em flowers, mate?” Jack retorted as he went to take the helm. “Don’t know who these organizers are, but I will say they’re makin’ us pirates look like proper gents.”

“Yeah! We have to help!” Sora ran after him.

“Only because I don’t like ’em. Now hurry up and haul to!”

At Jack’s orders, the others scattered over the deck to get the ship moving.

Axel walked alone through the castle. It had been a while, but everything was the same here, dim and quiet.

He had not expected Xemnas himself to head out for Twilight Town. But there was no way to warn Riku and Naminé now. Riku had taken Ansem’s form, though, with all of Ansem’s strength—so it wasn’t entirely impossible for him to win against Xemnas. Maybe...*maybe* there was a chance. However slender that hope was, Axel would cling to it. *Riku can handle him.*

Anyway, right now, he had his own task.

As he went down the halls, he sensed someone following him and turned. “You need something?”

“I don’t trust you,” Saïx replied flatly, the enormous Claymore in his hand.

“Trust? We don’t even have hearts,” said Axel with a twisted smile. “How can we trust anyone in the first place?”

“Where are you going?”

“My room. Where else would I go?” He shrugged, turned his back on Saïx, and kept going.

The first question was how to dodge Saïx and get Kairi out of here.

This won’t be easy, Axel thought with a sigh.

The Grim Reaper floated at the shore of the Port Royal harbor above the treasure chest filled with the cursed gold.

"I'll take the monster." Jack rushed at the Grim Reaper and lured it away.

"Now, to break that curse!" said Sora. The trio crept toward the chest and tossed in the gold pieces they'd found. The Grim Reaper changed back to its previous form—not so skeletal and slightly less ugly. "It worked!"

But as soon as those words left Sora's mouth, the Grim Reaper noticed and came after them.

"Wak!" Donald fumbled with his wand. "*Fire!*"

The Grim Reaper backed off, just a little, but it had overtaken Jack.

"We've got 'im!" As Sora closed in, the giant Heartless shook itself wildly.

"Ah-hooey!" Goofy yelped as a gust of wind knocked him into the sand. The maelstrom began scattering the gold pieces yet again.

"Aw, c'mon!" Sora complained. Once more, they had to run around collecting the pieces, and in the meantime, Jack—also a skeleton again—kept the Grim Reaper at bay.

"Quick now, Gala!"

"Really?! It's *Sora!*" he shouted as they returned the last of the gold. The Grim Reaper changed back again. "*This time we'll finish it!*" He charged with the Keyblade ready. "Take this!"

With a few blows, he managed to stun it.

"All right, my turn." Jack leaped right over Sora and brought his sword down on the Grim Reaper's head.

After a grinding, clunking noise like a mechanism breaking, the Heartless fell still.

"We did it!" Elated, Sora hugged Jack when he landed.

"Ah, not quite, mate..." Jack was hale and human again, but his gaze was fixed on someone else—Luxord.

The heart of light floating up from the Grim Reaper disappeared into Luxord's outstretched hand.

"Bravo, Sora," he said with a grin, opening a dark portal.

"Hey, wait!" Sora tried to catch him, but Luxord vanished, melting away into the darkness.

"Wak!" Donald stamped his feet.

"So, who was that chap?" asked Jack.

"He's part of this organization that's collecting hearts. They release the Heartless into different worlds, and then we defeat those Heartless." Sora glowered at the ground in frustration. "Over and over. We'll never stop them like this..."

"Got another plan, then?"

"We gotta find their stronghold and finish them off once and for all."

Jack shrugged. "Sailin' these waters, I've heard many a tale, but none like this."

Will came closer to offer anxiously, "Is there any way we can help?"

"Um..." Sora folded his arms. He couldn't think of anything he might ask the people of this world to do.

"Aye, there is," Jack cut in, pointing to the treasure chest with its heap of cursed gold.

The chest sank into the sea. They all stood on the deck, solemnly watching it disappear beneath the waters.

"Whether it's thirteenth organized or Heartless or what, one thing's certain," Jack muttered. "We don't need the likes of 'em about. They'll ruin the market for us true pirates."

"So that's why you went to Port Royal." Elizabeth sighed. "And here we thought you actually wanted to help people."

"A pirate always looks to profit, Miss Swann." Jack shrugged jauntily and strode to the helm.

"Too bad. You had us going there," said Sora.

At that, Jack paused.

"Thought you were turnin' over a new leaf!" Goofy added.

Jack spun around and smirked at them. "The question is what's under the leaf. Rewards, mate. Savvy?"

"Huh?" Sora instinctively backed away a step.

"That shiny blade of yours," said Jack. "That's the share I want."

Sora smirked in response and held out the Keyblade with the handle toward him. "Okay, sure."

"...That was far too easy. Where's the rub?" Jack took hold of the Keyblade. It promptly vanished from his hand and flew back into Sora's. Caught out, he smiled ruefully. "Aha. That'd be it."

"Well, you've got your ship, Jack." Sora held the Keyblade firm.

"That I do. But one day, when I've got a right mean crew behind me, I'll come to take that blade. By then, I'll have the way of wielding it."

At that declaration, the trio looked at one another.

"Gawrsh. Maybe Jack'll be able to use the Keyblade someday." Goofy grinned in amusement.

"How?!" Donald demanded without even pointing out how that made no sense.

Only very particular people could wield the Keyblade. Like King Mickey and Sora and Riku...

“A-hyuck! He and Sora are kinda alike, don’tcha think?” Goofy looked from one to the other.

“Are not!” Jack and Sora both exclaimed at once.

“See?” said Goofy, and Elizabeth laughed.

It was contagious. The sound of their mirth echoed over the dark seas.

Then a beam of dazzling light shone from the helm of Jack’s ship, the *Black Pearl*.

“Sora! The gate!” Donald pointed to the sky, where the keyhole had taken shape.

“Right!” Sora held the Keyblade high, and the ray of light streamed from it into the keyhole. “Guess we’d better be going now.”

“Right then, off with you. For now,” said Jack.

The trio soon took off again into the Other Sky.

Naminé sat quietly as tears ran down her cheeks.

Her drawings were tacked up here and there on the walls of the white room in the haunted mansion. She’d apparently passed the time with her artwork while she waited here alone for Riku and Axel. Riku perused the collection, realizing there were quite a few he hadn’t seen before.

He found one of himself smiling with Axel and Naminé and averted his eyes.

Then he became aware of someone outside.

“Naminé, go to the basement and hide in the pod room,” Riku said, resting a hand on her head as he turned his attention outside the window.

And just as he did, Nobodies surrounded the mansion—something that hadn’t happened since Axel’s attack. Although that hadn’t been the real mansion but another place that looked like it.

“Riku... Do you think Nobodies have a home? Somewhere we belong?” Naminé wondered.

“There’s no time to talk right now. When the organization attacks, I don’t know if I can fight them off and protect you at the same time.” He summoned Soul Eater to his hand.

“This is the *only* time we have to talk,” she argued. “Do you think Nobodies really don’t have hearts? Who told Axel he doesn’t have one? The heart—there are secrets that—”

“Naminé!” Riku had to interrupt. Nobodies were crawling out of the corners, and one sprang straight at her.

He made it in front of her just in time to knock the Nobody aside with Soul Eater.

“So *here* you are.” From a strange warp in the air, a man in a

black cloak appeared.

Riku faced him with Soul Eater ready, getting Naminé to safety behind him.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen that face.” The man removed his hood and smiled at Riku.

The two men, who bore more than a slight resemblance, stared each other down.

Riku knew who this was. “You’re...Xemnas.”

He hadn’t suspected that Organization XIII’s leader would come.

And based on what Axel had told him, he couldn’t win this fight alone.

Still, he couldn’t simply give up.

If I can at least hold him off until Naminé escapes...

“I am. Riku—or rather, Ansem... No, not Ansem, either. Perhaps I should call you Xehanort.” Xemnas stepped silently toward him. “Well? Don’t you feel more at home in that form?”

“The opposite, actually,” said Riku.

Xemnas let out a chuckle. “Perfect. On your guard!”

Twin swords, glowing with a dire red light, formed in his hands—the Ethereal Blades.

In the next moment, they clashed against Soul Eater.



**ANTHEM — MEET AGAIN /
AXEL'S LAST STAND**



ANTHEM—MEET AGAIN / AXEL'S LAST STAND



RADIANT GARDEN



CHAPTER 1

RADIANT GARDEN

IN TWILIGHT TOWN, WHERE THE SUNSET'S LONG SHADOWS teem with mysteries...

Hayner, Pence, and Olette were in their usual spot.

The three of them had gotten together in the storage space they'd claimed under the train tracks.

"I'm absolutely sure of it," said Olette, clutching her little cloth purse.

Hayner slumped his shoulders. "But that can't be right."

"Then how would you explain this crystal?" Olette opened the purse and took out a blue orb.

"Well...", Hayner started, folding his arms, and fell silent.

"Besides, I made the purse myself. There's no way I can be wrong about this."

She was completely adamant. Hayner looked to Pence for help.

"Sora and his friends had one, too. The same purse with the blue crystal in it. There can't be two of the same thing," said Pence.

Hayner and Olette nodded.

"Except there are," he went on. "Where could they have gotten ahold of another purse and another crystal?"

"We'd have to ask them," Hayner said with a frown.

"I've got a theory. Maybe there's a copy of this world, and that's where this purse and crystal came from. And things that aren't here are *there*." Pence grinned at them.

"So in the other world, where Sora got these—maybe that's where Kairi is?" said Olette.

She sounded uncertain, but Hayner jumped up and stood atop a pile of boxes to shout, "I get it! Pence, you're a genius!"

"But we don't know where it actually is or how to get there..." Looking up at Hayner, Pence heaved a sigh.

At the same moment, in the same town, in the white room of the haunted mansion...

Soul Eater met the Ethereal Blades.

Surrounded by the walls covered in Naminé's drawings, two men with swords glared at each other.

They bore strong similarities to each other. Not only were they wearing the same clothes, but their resemblance was closer than that of brothers, from their faces to their builds.

"Xehanort's power should be greater than this," said Xemnas.

Ansem—or rather, Riku—scowled in distaste, his fingers tightening on Soul Eater. He couldn't land a blow on Xemnas, who appeared to be doing no more than standing still. In fact, he couldn't even move.

"What's the matter?" Xemnas said, trying to provoke Riku, and the Ethereal Blades disappeared from his hands.

Gritting his teeth, Riku readied Soul Eater. Xemnas took a step toward him.

A small cry came from Naminé. "—DiZ...!"

Without a sound or any other signal to his presence, DiZ stood behind Xemnas, quietly watching him and Riku.

"Ah... Now I see." Xemnas paused and shifted his gaze to DiZ, narrowing his eyes.

"Xemnas," DiZ called to him.

But Xemnas did not even fully turn toward him, only smiled dauntlessly—and vanished.

"Maybe you were just trying to help," said Riku, "but you ruined my chance to take him down."

He turned Soul Eater on DiZ.

The Gummi Ship touched down on the next world—which happened to be Hollow Bastion.

"I thought everything was under control here...or it was supposed to be..." Sora scratched his head as suspicious dark figures scuttled by in front of them.

"There's more Heartless?" Goofy mumbled, astounded, readying his shield.

"We'd better go ask Leon what's up," said Sora, charging into the Heartless. They were scattered into nothing before the others had time to blink. "That's a few less to worry about!"

Goofy stowed his shield. "Gee, Sora, you've gotten pretty strong," he said lazily.

Sora rested the Keyblade across his shoulders. "I always was!"

"Nah, not really," Donald remarked, and Goofy nodded.

"Aw, you too, Donald?" Sora pouted.

"You weren't this strong when we first met ya," said Goofy.

Donald roundly agreed and added, "You were kinda helpless back then."

Goofy bobbed his head.

"C'mon, guys!" Sora protested, crossing his arms, and then someone came running toward them.

"There you are, lads!"

"Uncle Scrooge!" Donald hopped up.

The old gentleman duck in the top hat stood before them holding three ice cream pops.

"Wak?" Donald cocked his head and leaned in for a whiff of the ice cream.

"Bless me bagpipes, I've finally done it!" Scrooge crowed. "I recreated that old sea-salt ice cream!"

"Ice cream? Ooh, I'll have one!" Sora wasted no time scampering up to Scrooge and taking one. Donald and Goofy accepted the other two.

"It doesn't taste funny this time?" Donald uncertainly examined the blue ice cream.

"Try it and see!" Scrooge urged them.

Sora didn't need the encouragement to take a bite. "It's salty! But sweet..."

He took another bite. It was a curious mix of flavors, with a subdued sweetness emerging behind the salty flavor.

Sweet, cold but salty ice cream. Somehow...it tasted familiar. Like something he knew from long ago.

"Wak! That flavor!" Donald cried after tasting it.

"What about it?" asked Sora, but Donald just kept staring at the ice cream. "C'mon, what?"

Donald seemed perplexed. Sora shrugged and went on eating his.

It really felt like he'd tasted it before.

Yeah... Sitting with the others, watching the sunset somewhere... But where was that?

"This is pretty good!" said Goofy.

Scrooge puffed out his chest with satisfaction. "Aye, isn't it unique? When I was a lad, all the young'uns were crazy for it."

"Can I have another one?" Sora held up his bare ice cream pop stick.

"That was fast!" Donald exclaimed.

"Maybe you guys are slow," Sora retorted, but he licked the stick as if he did regret finishing it so quickly.

"Well, you can have as many as you like!" Scrooge reached for a mini-freezer behind him and took out another ice cream pop.

"Don't eat too many," said Goofy, just a tiny bit concerned. "You'll get a stomachache."

“But I’ve wanted ice cream for ages!” Sora took the second one and chomped down.

“That sea-salt ice cream is something, isn’t it? But sadly, the rest of town’s in no state to enjoy it,” said Scrooge, worry clouding his face. “Would ye mind helping out Leon and his chums?”

“Oh, right! We’d better go!” Sora crammed the rest of the ice cream in his mouth and took off.

Right then, Leon was in Ansem’s study, fighting with his gunblade. Heartless appeared one after another to surround him.

“They just keep coming,” he muttered, then glared at the main terminal’s screen. “Is the MCP making Heartless by itself...?” He began typing on the keyboard. “Tron...”

There was no reply—not from Tron, anyway. Instead an alarm sounded and a message appeared on the screen:

IGNORANT USERS. OBEY THE MCP.

A deep frown rose on Leon’s face.

The trio ran to Merlin’s house, driving off Heartless along the way.

“What happened to this place, Leon?!” Sora shouted the moment he opened the door.

Cid didn’t seem to notice, completely absorbed in whatever work he was doing at the computer. Yuffie and Merlin were peeking over his shoulders.

“Hurry up, Cid!” Yuffie stamped her foot.

“Maybe if ya kept quiet!” Cid snapped.

“Confound it, how long will this take?” Even Merlin sounded impatient.

“Um, what’s going on?” Sora warily tapped Cid on the shoulder.

“Aha! Talk about yer good timin’.” Cid paused in typing and finally turned to the newcomers.

“The MCP is causing a bunch of trouble inside the computer,” said Yuffie.

“Not again!” Donald slumped in dismay.

“How’s Tron doing?” Sora asked.

Cid and Yuffie exchanged glances.

“We can’t reach him...” Yuffie glanced back at the screen.

“We’ll go check on him!” said Sora.

“Thanks, kid. Meanwhile, we’re puttin’ together an MCP eradication program. I got a hunch it’s almost finished, too,” Cid told

them with some self-congratulation.

Merlin looked askance at him and sighed. "Well, I hope your hunch is right for once."

"Listen," Yuffie said to the trio before the other two could bicker anymore, "we're gonna need Tron's help when the program's complete..."

"Got it. We'll make sure to tell him!" Sora nodded.

"All right, lads, we're counting on you!" said Merlin.

Sora grinned at him and headed off for Ansem's study with Donald and Goofy.

The path to the castle was crawling with Heartless, and so was the postern. The trio fought their way through to the study, where Leon and Aerith were waiting for them.

"Did you check in with Cid?" asked Leon with his gunblade still raised. They had to keep on guard against the onslaught of Heartless.

"Yup!" Sora replied. Aerith gave him a tiny smile.

"And the program?" said Leon.

"He said it's almost done," Donald reported.

"Oh, thank goodness!" said Aerith. "Hey, Leon, why don't you go back and help Cid? I've got this place under control."

Leon frowned, wrinkling the scar between his eyes. "Are you sure...?" Receiving a pointed look, he broke off and nodded. "Right. It's all yours."

"How's Tron?" asked Sora.

"We still can't get in touch with him." Leon glanced at the big computer screen. "Maybe you guys should give it a shot."

"We'll just go talk to him in person." Sora went to the oversized keyboard and looked up at the screen.

It still displayed the message in red text:

IGNORANT USERS. OBEY THE MCP.

"Then I've got a favor to ask," said Leon. "When you find Tron, could you tell him to come to the I/O tower? That's where we'll upload the MCP eradication program."

Aerith nodded, agreeing with the plan.

"The I/O tower," Goofy repeated thoughtfully to help himself remember.

"Thanks. And watch your backs," said Leon.

Sora typed in his and Donald's and Goofy's names, and they were transported to the world inside the computer.

When they found Tron inside the Space Paranoids world, it was just in time—Heartless were bearing down on him from all sides.

“Tron!”

“Sora! Watch out!” Tron cried, and in the same instant a red laser beam blasted him to the ground.

“Are you okay?!” Goofy ran to him as Sora took up the Keyblade and plowed through the lasered Heartless.

“Take this—*Fire!*” Donald blasted it with some magic.

After Goofy helped him to his feet, Tron knocked back the Heartless that came after him. The creatures regrouped to surround them again.

“Here I come!” Sora knocked them away all at once. Donald, Goofy, and Tron were there to finish them off. “Whew... Did we get ‘em all for now?”

Sora checked the area nearby. There were no more Heartless in the vicinity that he could see.

“Thanks.” Tron sat down on the spot in exhausted relief. “You really saved me.”

“So what’s going on in here?” asked Donald.

“The MCP is ready to wage all-out war against the users,” said Tron. “What effect is that having on the outside?”

“It’s causing trouble with the town’s control system. But Cid’s making a program that can de-rezz the MCP.” Sora plunked down beside him for a breather.

“We gotta go pick it up at the I/O tower,” Goofy added, peering curiously at Tron. “He thinks we can use it to stop the MCP for good.”

“That’s amazing! We’ll try it!” His spirits lifted, Tron jumped to his feet, then paused and cocked his head. “But who’s this Cid?”

“He’s a friend of ours. Leon, and Merlin, and Aerith and Yuffie... They’re on the outside, trying to help you,” Sora said as he got up, too.

Hearing that, Tron smiled broadly. “I must have a lot of user friends!”

He sounded truly glad for it.

“Well, let’s get to that I/O tower!” Donald held up his wand in determination.

Cid went on typing, his face grim as he stared at the screen.

“Finished?” Leon squinted at it anxiously.

Cid sucked his teeth in frustration. “Would be if it didn’t involve parsing that old loon’s magic.”

“Old loon, you say?!” Merlin’s voice rose to a falsetto with indignation. He pointed his wand at Cid. “Why, I’ll show you who’s

old!”

Just as he made an ominous wave of his wand, Cid removed a small disc from the computer. “Done!”

Merlin’s spell struck him in his moment of triumph and knocked him flat. But Cid didn’t even seem to notice, smirking from the floor with the disc safe in his hand. “There ya go, Leon. One homemade program topped with loony wizard magic.”

“All right. I’m off.” Leon took the disc and headed briskly for the door.

“Be on your guard!” Merlin called after him.

The trio and Tron stood in the I/O tower amid deafening alarms.

“C’mon!” Donald stamped his foot.

“Hurry up, Leon!” Sora yelled at the ceiling—and finally a bright light beamed down from overhead.

“Here it is!” Tron took a flat disc with a hole in the middle from his back and held it aloft. It floated up, drawn into the light, and after beginning to glow itself, drifted back down into his hands.



“Does it feel right?” Donald asked.

“This is a very strange program...” The shining disc illuminated Tron’s puzzled face.

“That’s Merlin’s magic!” said Donald with a streak of pride in his instructor.

“Huh? There’s a power boost for me, too!” Tron replaced the disc on his back and turned to Sora.

“So...it’ll work?” Sora grinned.

“Well, like you users say—we won’t know until we try!” said Tron.

Sora nodded. “Then let’s try it!”

“It’s time to face the MCP. Let’s go!”

Tron led the way out of the tower.

“The MCP is straight ahead.”

Tron had brought them to a huge round building with some kind of cylindrical machine hanging from the ceiling.

“So there you are.” The man who greeted them was dressed like Tron, except with orange glowing lines and patterns, and regarded them with stern disdain.

“Who’s that?” Sora whispered to Tron.

“Commander Sark. Second only to the MCP.” Tron quietly readied his disc, which also served as his weapon.

“Does that mean he’s the strongest after the MCP?”

Tron nodded as Sark fixed a nasty glare on him.

“Tenacious little bugs. Your time is up. Prepare for de-resolution!” Sark summoned up Heartless to attack them.

“Wak!” Donald furiously waved his wand.

“You take care of those things,” said Tron. “I’ll deal with Sark!”

“Roger!” Sora replied, and the trio took on the Heartless to cover Tron as he charged at Sark.

“Traitor!” Sark also had a disc, which he hurled at Tron.

“Sark!” Tron knocked it aside with his own. The weapon rebounded and struck Sark in the chest.

“Guh—!” Sark collapsed to one knee.

Sora rushed in with the Keyblade, and Sark toppled face forward to the floor.

“...Tron.” The new voice rumbled from above their heads, where the alarms were blaring.

The four of them searched for the source until they saw the eerie bright red face on the enormous cylinder before them.

“Is that the MCP?!” Sora repositioned the Keyblade.

“That’s right. Didn’t pay much attention to visual interface, did it?” Tron remarked, looking up at the program.

“Tron, you still don’t understand?” it said with its unsettling voice. “We have no need for users. We programs have advanced; they are superfluous. Merge with me, and the world will be ours to control!”

“You’re the one who doesn’t get it.”

As Tron glared back, the expression on the huge, weird face twisted with anger. “Sark... Sark!”

Hearing his name, Sark dragged himself upright.

“All of my functions are now yours,” the MCP told him, and Sark’s body grew. Barriers of light formed around the MCP.

“Whoa!” Sora jumped back.

“Sora—let’s do this!” Tron tossed his disc up at Sark, now towering over them, and it found its mark on his jaw. Sark halted for a moment, so Sora leaped up high and bashed at his head with the Keyblade.

“Wak!”

The barriers of light surrounding the MCP began whirling with ferocious speed, knocking Donald and Goofy aside.

“Wa-whoa!”

“Sora, over here!” Tron called. There was a gap in the barriers.

Sora jumped down from Sark and dashed over to Tron.

“We’ve got to feed the program into the MCP through here!” Tron put his hand on Sora’s shoulder.

Sora felt a mysterious power flowing into him. He raised the Keyblade, and a beam of light shot out at the MCP.

“Wow!” Donald marveled. “That’s neat!”

But as soon as the words left him, an earsplitting metallic shriek rang out. The face of the MCP warped and disappeared from the cylinder, and white light swirled in its place.

“We did it!” Tron jumped for joy and hugged Sora.

“Whoa! That’s not very program-like.” Sora laughed, a bit embarrassed.

“A-hyuck! So Tron has a not-so-serious side, too,” Goofy said cheerfully.

“I learned it from you three!” Tron let go of Sora. “I do have my limits, though. I’m still a program.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll tweak your programming when we get back out.” Sora grinned.

“You...? Er...maybe we’d better not try that,” Tron said with some concern.

His worried expression wasn’t very like him, either. Sora had to laugh. “Aw, how about it? Singin’ Tron or Dancin’ Tron... Whatcha

think?"

"Sounds like fun to me!" Donald agreed.

Tron laughed. "Well, before you all crash me... Sora, Donald, Goofy..."

They looked up at him as his voice turned earnest again.

"And all the other users out there..." He turned his gaze upward to address the ones on the outside, even though they couldn't see him. "Thank you. You truly helped me, and you made me so much stronger. You taught me what friendship is. I'll never forget that. As soon as I met you, I knew we would defeat the MCP and free the system together."

Tron held out his hand to Sora, who grasped it, only to be pulled into another hug. Seeing the boy's bewildered expression, he pulled back and grinned. "Isn't this what users do when they're sorry to say good-bye?"

"Uh... It's a first for me." Sora shrugged sheepishly.

"It's kinda like a promise that we'll see each other again, Tron," Goofy explained.

"Oh, I see. Well, then..." Tron caught Goofy in a hug, then Donald. "I promise."

The trio nodded. Tron gave them a smile, a real one that showed how glad he was for their friendship, and then began to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Sora called out.

Tron went to where the MCP had been, to the swirl of white light—and flung himself into it.

"Tron..."

He seemed to dissolve into the brilliant glow. As the others stood wondering, a rumble shook the entire building.

As Aerith closely watched the screen in the computer lab, Yuffie came running in.

"Things are settling down in town!" she announced. "The only Heartless left anywhere are the local variety. And there aren't as many as before."

"What a relief," said Aerith. "Now, if we can just get those three back in one piece..."

She turned back to the computer to find it humming with effort again. Sora and his friends appeared with flashes of light.

"There you are!" Aerith dashed over to them.

Yuffie grinned. "Good work, guys!"

But Sora, Donald, and Goofy didn't smile back.

"...How's the town?" Sora mumbled.

"A-okay!" Yuffie gave him a thumbs-up.

“Not a trace of the MCP,” Aerith added brightly. “It’s all back to normal. We did it.”

“Hey, why the long face?” Yuffie leaned in to peer at Sora. “Did something happen?”

“Tron just...disappeared.” Donald was downcast, too.

“And he promised he’d see us again...”

But the moment Sora said that, an alert beeped from the computer.

“What now?!” Aerith spun toward the screen.

“Greetings, friends. System is up and ready for user input.”

It was Tron’s voice.

“Tron!” The trio scurried to the computer.

“*Stay in touch,*” said Tron. He was definitely talking to them.

“Hooray!” Donald shoved himself in front of the keyboard and pounded on it for sheer joy.

“Hey, stop it! That tickles!”

“Tron is ticklish?” Goofy cocked his head.

Sora crept up to the keyboard and mischievously started mashing random keys. “How ’bout this?”

“Please—stop it!” Tron protested.

“And this!” Donald joined in, poking at the keyboard.

“G-guys, cut it out! Really!”

At that, they finally stopped.

“I want to show you something, to thank everyone,” said Tron. *“Something I dug up in the system archives. You can see how the town looked back when it was first built.”*

Bright light shone from the screen, filling the computer lab—as well as the entire town outside, they found when they left the castle.

“I was wondering when our town got an awful name like Hollow Bastion...” Yuffie squinted against the brilliance.

“You know, the town had another name once...,” Aerith murmured, gazing at the shimmering scenery.

“What was it?” said Sora.

“Radiant Garden.”

The light scattered into tiny glowing motes streaming through the streets as if they had welled up from springs throughout the town.

And as that radiance filled the world...

The glory of days gone by took shape before them—as did their hopes for the future.



WAITING FOR YOU

CHAPTER 2

WAITING FOR YOU

AXEL SAT PATIENTLY WITH HIS BACK AGAINST A WALL. He was waiting for the perfect moment to rescue Kairi.

If he made his move right now, he wouldn't have to worry about Xemnas. But what about Saïx? Or Xigbar? Or Luxord?

He really wasn't sure he could do this. He may have talked a big game, but he had an awful lot of doubt behind it.

Maybe he was discovering the emotion known as *fear*.

Feeling a sudden presence, he looked up in apprehension.

"...Oh. It's you."

The big tawny dog was here, wagging his tail at Axel.

"Pluto?"

Hearing his name, Pluto jumped on Axel and covered his face in slobbery kisses.

"Aw, cut it out. Do you *still* smell the king on me?"

Pluto barked once, loud and definitive.

Axel had seen Pluto jump fearlessly into a portal to the Corridors of Darkness. And Kairi had done the same.

This was no time to hesitate, then.

He gave Pluto a good hug and pressed his cheek against his fur. "Okay, let's go."

Pluto woofed in reply. Axel got to his feet and headed deeper into the bowels of the castle.

The sight of the castle soaring up into the sky was clearly visible from the city outskirts.

The trio perched on the ramparts of Radiant Garden as they ate their sea-salt ice cream.

"Gawrrsh, ya think Hollow Bastion will be okay?" Goofy said between licks.

"Sure it will," said Sora, gazing at the distant castle. "Leon and everyone are here."

"That castle's quite a sight." Goofy narrowed his eyes, recalling a

different castle. "I hope Belle and the Beast are doin' all right..."

Donald, too, was thinking of another castle—and the sweetheart he'd left behind there. "Daisy...", he said, letting out a sigh.

Sora turned to his friends. "I bet they're all fine."

They are. They must be. And Riku and Kairi, too—if they're okay, that's all that matters.

I really hope they are.

Having finished his ice cream first, Donald cocked his head. "Hmm... Y'know, Sora..."

Sora was staring distractedly at the citadel. "Huh?"

"Have we ever had this ice cream?"

"Uh, we're having it now."

"That's not what I mean!" Donald jumped up and took the photograph from his pocket.

"Oh..." Goofy was still working on his ice cream. "So that was sea-salt ice cream in the box with that photo!"

Beside him, Sora leaned over to peer at it.

When they'd been assaulted by droves of Heartless here in Hollow Bastion before, the darkness had suddenly sucked them in. But someone must have opened the portal—and in that darkness, someone had left a box containing this photo and an ice cream pop. The picture was of Hayner, Pence, and Olette. And Roxas.

That familiar name. Roxas. The organization members threw it around a lot.

What could the image mean?

And why had Kairi been with Hayner and Pence and Olette in Twilight Town?

Roxas, Axel...and Kairi. Were those three connected somehow?

"I wonder how Hayner and his pals are doin'," Goofy remarked languidly, and Sora raised his head.

The setting sun seemed to rest atop the castle as it shone on their faces.

It's so bright...

He'd done this before. Sometime. Sitting somewhere high up, gazing out at a town in the sunset, having sea-salt ice cream with... someone.

Was it...with Hayner and his friends?

No... Someone else... Maybe? He wasn't sure.

"I want to go see them," said Sora. "Hayner and the others."

Donald and Goofy nodded.

"Maybe they'll know what that photo's all about," Goofy added.

Taking it as a cue, Sora leaped down from their perch on the ramparts. "Let's go to Twilight Town!"

They might be able to clear up some of these mysteries there.

Unable to wait, Sora broke into a run.

On the sloped streets of Twilight Town, Hayner and Pence stood in front of the bulletin board, arguing about where Kairi could have gone. A few feet away, Olette was kicking at pebbles on the ground.

"I hope Kairi's okay..." She sighed. She looked up at the sky and took the little purse out of her pocket.

She'd worked hard on the embroidery, with her mother teaching her as she went. She didn't have any good friends who were girls and wanted to hear about things like that—Hayner and Pence certainly didn't get it—but she felt like Kairi could have been one. She would make a good friend. They could talk about embroidery and all the other things you couldn't really talk about with boys...

"Standing around wasting space like always, huh?" someone taunted suddenly.

Olette turned to see Seifer with his minions assembled behind him.

"What do *you* want?" Hayner said sourly.

Seifer smirked. "Nothing from you."

"Seifer's busy, y'know," Rai piped up.

"Yeah, well, we're busy ourselves." Hayner glared at them. "So get lost."

Seifer spun around self-importantly and started sauntering away.

"Are you literally lost? That's not the way back to your turf," said Hayner.

"What, you didn't hear?" Seifer slowly turned back again. "There's a rumor that some weird guys are hanging around over at the haunted mansion."

The first one to react was Olette.

"Huh...?" She ran up to him. "Hey, what weird guys? Tell us more!"

"You remember that kid, Sora?"

"Course we do!" Hayner snapped.

"Well, those silver things Sora got rid of and some guy all in black have been showing up over there, they say."

With that, Seifer walked away, leaving Olette deep in thought.

"Weird guys over at the haunted mansion... Sounds like another wonder of Twilight Town," Pence remarked with his hands linked behind his head.

"Yeah, the one about the girl in the window was a masterpiece among urban legends." Hayner wasn't too concerned with it, either. "And it was just curtains fluttering."

"C'mon... Seifer said those silver things that Sora fought are

there,” Olette insisted, her back still to the other two.

“Sure he did—but so what, Olette?” Hayner asked, baffled that she would believe Seifer.

Pence folded his arms as something occurred to him. “That guy who came after Kairi... He was wearing all black, right?”

“Yeah, so? What’s with you two?” asked Hayner.

Olette turned and met Pence’s eyes.

“The haunted mansion!” they both burst out at once.

They nodded to each other and took off.

“Wha—? Hey, wait! Guys!” Hayner scrambled after them. “What’re you talking about?” he asked Pence when he caught up.

“You know, the other world—the copy of Twilight Town!” Pence replied without slowing down. “The way to cross over is in the haunted mansion!”

“What? Uh...” Hayner was still confused, but he gave in anyway. “Okay, well, let’s check it out!”

“C’mon! Let’s go!” Olette shouted to them. Hayner and Pence sped up.

In the white room of the haunted mansion, Riku stood unmoving, with Soul Eater in hand and a cold glare trained on DiZ.

“Riku...don’t,” said Naminé.

He lowered his weapon and pulled his hood up over his head, casting his face in shadow. With a tiny sound of frustration, he turned his back on DiZ and Naminé.

Silence fell until a brief sigh from DiZ broke it.

At that, Riku looked at him again. “Still after revenge, aren’t you...Ansem the Wise?”

“Not exactly...,” DiZ, or rather the real Ansem, equivocated.

“Well, isn’t that nice for you? You had us do the dirty work, and now you can play dumb.” Riku’s voice was low, brimming with rancor.

“No,” said Ansem. “I’m not the one who left, Riku. That was you two. Although that comes as no surprise...”

At that, Riku pulled out a chair and sat down, staring up at him. “Are you here for a reason?”

Ansem shrugged and took out three ice cream pops. “Here, have some ice cream first.”

“...Are you making fun of me?”

Riku was clearly offended, but Naminé simply took two of the bars from Ansem and held one out to him.

“Riku?” she prompted, but he made no move to accept it.

Ansem took a bite of ice cream before he spoke. “I...must

apologize to you two.”

Riku said nothing and glared at him.

“I won’t ask you to forgive me for my foolish obsession with revenge. But at the very least, allow me to express my regret. I was wrong.”

Riku stood and turned away again. Naminé nervously watched his tensed shoulders.

“The darkness took advantage of the weakness in you—in your heart. But your indomitable hope kept it at bay,” said Ansem. “You made the darkness your strength, and—”

“Is that all you came here for? To tell me this?” Riku interrupted.

Ansem quietly shook his head. “Naminé, Roxas, and Xemnas... The Nobodies of those with strong hearts are peculiar beings. My—that is, *our* theories proved fruitless. Coming into contact with a strong heart transforms a world. And not just worlds, but people themselves—and even Nobodies.”

Naminé, head lowered and hand extended with the ice cream for Riku, perked up upon hearing those words.

That’s it... Yes. The mystery of the heart.

When we encounter someone special...the world changes. Our hearts change. Everything changes.

“Riku... Your strength is something special as well,” Ansem went on. “I must ask you to save the worlds. Just a request from an old fool—but I will do anything in my power to aid you.”

Riku only stood there, silent and motionless, his back to Ansem.

Deep in the castle, there was a cage, suspended from the ceiling. Axel peered up at it and called to the girl who had to be inside. Beside him, Pluto wagged his tail wildly.

“Kairi?” he called, and at the same time, Pluto barked.

Her face appeared from behind the bars. “You...?”

He smiled up at her with a hint of a smirk. “Axel. Didn’t you have it memorized?”

Kairi nodded.

“Um, well... I’m sorry about before. It’s my fault you’re locked up in here. Just wait. I’m gonna get you out.” Axel opened a dark rift, and Pluto jumped into it a step ahead of him.

Then someone else spoke behind him. “I’ve been waiting for you, Axel.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d show up.” His smirk turned nastier as he turned to see Saïx. He didn’t take his eyes off the other man as he spoke to the girl in the cage. “Listen, Kairi! Trust me. I’m going to get you out!”

Behind him, the portal closed.

“What are you saying...? Vile traitor!” The great Claymore took shape at Saïx’s back.

Axel didn’t waste a second grabbing his chakrams. But his body was reluctant somehow.

I don’t want to disappear... But still, it wouldn’t be so bad if I did. Not here.

Axel let out a deep breath and leaped into the air as flames erupted around them.

“...Pathetic!” The Claymore moved to block Axel’s strike, while Saïx himself didn’t even twitch.

This is a pretty overwhelming disadvantage, Axel thought. Well, I knew that before we started fighting. I can’t win against Saïx with my own strength.

Still, he refused to hesitate. He had to force this path open.

He wanted...to find hope—the hope that Sora and Riku had.

Saïx gave him a cruel grin. “You will lose everything!”

And then the Claymore pierced Axel’s chest.

I don’t want to disappear.

I can’t disappear now.

I shouldn’t have to disappear at all.

Why am I doing all this? Who is it for?

For Roxas... For Riku, for Naminé... And for myself.

There are still things I should do. Things I have to do.

Saïx flung Axel back, and he slammed into the floor.

“Maybe so, but I can run faster than any of you.” Axel climbed unsteadily to his feet with a smirk.

A dark rift yawned open behind him once again, and he vanished into the blackness.

“Axel!” cried Kairi.

“There’s no escape for you!” Saïx followed Axel—or tried to. The portal closed in front of his face.

They’d been away for a while, but Twilight Town was as serene as ever. Sora sighed in relief as they took it all in.

“Gawrsh, so nothin’s changed at all, huh?” Goofy sounded reassured, too.

“Let’s go find Hayner and the others!” Sora took off in the direction of the trio’s hangout.

“Sora! Over there!” Donald shouted.

“What now, Don— Ack!” When Sora turned around, he saw the hole in the town wall leading to the haunted mansion—and the Nobodies that were currently pouring out of it.

The Nobodies that were also heading straight for them.

“What’s going on?” Sora raised the Keyblade to knock aside their attacks.

“D’ya think they’re comin’ from the mansion?” said Goofy, likewise blocking the attacks with his shield.

“We’d better take a look over there first,” Sora agreed as Donald fired a blast of magic.

They headed to the haunted mansion through the wall, fending off Nobodies along the way.

The sea-salt ice cream pops were melting in Naminé’s hands. Riku stood perfectly still, his gaze still piercing Ansem the Wise.

“Roxas...,” Naminé whispered, as if praying to her dear friend for help—and then they felt a presence.

A dark rift opened in the corner of the room.

“*More* organization...?!” Gripping Soul Eater, Riku took a step toward the portal.

The black-shrouded man who emerged from it had flaming red hair.

“Axel!” Naminé cried.

“Hey.” He was grasping at his chest as he staggered toward Naminé. He glanced up at Riku and summarily bit into the ice cream. “Ooh, salty...,” he mumbled, and then he collapsed into a chair, his breathing labored.

“Axel...are you hurt?” Naminé jumped up, and the rest of the ice cream fell to the floor.

“Don’t worry—it’s no big deal. The bigger deal is that.” He gestured with his chin toward the dark rift. “If you go through there, it’ll take you straight to Kairi. Hurry.”

“Got it. Let’s go, Naminé.” Riku started toward the rift, looking back at her.

“But Axel is...” Naminé’s anxious gaze didn’t stray from him.

“Just gimme your ice cream and get out of here.” Axel took it out of her hand, grinning at her as she stood there. “Get going, will you? Don’t you want to meet Kairi?”

Naminé nodded weakly. A tear slid down her cheek. “What about you?”

“I’ve gotta make sure Sora and his sidekicks get there.”

She reached for Axel’s hand, the one that held the ice cream, and clasped it in her own.

His hand was too cold.

“Thank you, Axel...” She smiled softly at him. “See you.”

He nodded. “See ya, Naminé.”

She returned the gesture, as if making sure, and then dashed toward the dark rift with Riku.

“Well, Ansem? Are you coming?” Riku asked, one foot already sinking into the darkness.

Ansem shook his head. “There are still things I must do here. The same as him.”

Riku fixed him with another stare.

“Go,” said Ansem. “Go and rescue Kairi.”

At his urging, Naminé and Riku finally nodded and vanished one after the other into the corridor.

The two men remaining in the white room each let out a small sigh at nearly the same time, which struck Axel as funny. He laughed under his breath and took a bite of ice cream.

“Do you need help with that?” Ansem asked him, glancing pointedly at his wounded chest.

“What’s the point? Nobodies aren’t supposed to exist, right?” Axel popped the rest of the ice cream in his mouth and dragged himself upright. “Besides, this way I’ll finally get to see Roxas again.”

He tossed away the Popsicle stick and opened another dark rift in front of him.

“Well, I’m off, Ansem the Wise.” He smiled as he made his farewell.

Arriving in Twilight Town, King Mickey took in the scene with a deep, long breath.

He could sense someone here... Many someones.

Sora... Riku, Donald and Goofy, Naminé, Axel...and Ansem the Wise.

What did it mean? What was happening here?

The town had the same scent as Traverse Town once had.

As he began to wonder about that, he caught sight of a Nobody.

“Here, too...?!” King Mickey took it down with his Keyblade and headed for where the others were gathering.

When Sora, Donald, and Goofy finally reached the haunted mansion, the first thing they saw was Hayner, Pence, and Olette sprawled on the ground.

“Hey! Are you guys okay?” Sora rushed to help up Hayner, but he seemed completely drained of strength and only fell backward again, facing the sky.

Donald helped Pence, too, and Goofy did the same for Olette.

“We came here looking for Kairi. And then those silver things

attacked us...,” Hayner said with an exasperated sigh.

Donald came over to him. “You gotta be careful!”

“Yeah,” said Sora, “you didn’t have to go and—”

“Course we did,” Hayner interrupted defensively as he got to his feet. “We have to help our friend.”

“Oh... I didn’t think of it that way. You’re Kairi’s friends, too.”

Hayner nodded forcefully and turned toward the haunted mansion. “Word is, this place is getting a lot of really weird visitors,” he muttered.

Olette ran to his side. “We thought the gateway to an alternate Twilight Town might be here.”

“Alternate Twilight Town?” Sora repeated.

Donald cocked his head. “What’s that mean?”

“Hey, Goofy, could we see that crystal you have?” asked Pence.

From his pocket, Goofy removed the crystal from the purse.

“I made that purse myself, and I still have it,” said Olette, showing them her own. “So there can’t be two. But there are.”

“And this is from the trophy that Seifer gave to Sora. You left it here, remember?” Hayner took out a crystal that had been set in the trophy.

“That trophy’s the only one of its kind,” Pence explained. “Same for the crystals. Red, yellow, green, blue—only one of each color. But you’ve got your own.”

“So, where’d you get those things?” asked Hayner.

“Um...” Sora looked at Goofy.

“The king gave us the purse to buy train tickets,” Goofy said. “And the crystal was inside.”

Donald nodded.

“Right, so there’s gotta be another town out there like this one,” Hayner told them. “That would explain why there’s another of Olette’s purse and another Four-Crystal Trophy. Everything makes sense that way!”

The trio exchanged glances.

Sora was still confused. “What makes sense?”

“Anything missing from here must be in the other Twilight Town,” said Pence.

“Like Kairi!” Olette added.

“Oh! I get it!”

But the moment Sora was persuaded, more Nobodies surged out of the ground.

“Whoa!” Everyone edged back and prepared for another fight—but before it began, someone dashed in to knock the enemies aside.

“Watch out!”

“Your Majesty!” Donald and Goofy both exclaimed. King Mickey

slashed through the Nobodies in the blink of an eye and then turned to grin at them.

Donald ran to him. "How come you're here, Your Majesty?!"

"I've got news. I found out where Ansem the Wise is. What about you fellas?"

"Someone gave us a clue about where Kairi is," said Sora. They'd come here because of that photograph and the sea-salt ice cream...

"A clue? Who did?" asked the king.

"...Riku. I think." Sora closed his eyes for a moment after saying that name, then observed the king steadily.

"If that's what ya think, Sora, then I bet you're right." King Mickey beamed encouragingly at him.

"So...Riku's okay?" Sora said tentatively.

"If that's what ya think..."

Sora took a step closer. "C'mon, Your Majesty! Can't you just tell me what you know already?" he practically shouted.

The king briskly turned away. "...It's not for me to say."

"But Your Majesty! Why not?!" Sora pressed.

"...I made a promise. I don't wanna break it."

"Wait... You promised Riku?"

King Mickey clamped his mouth shut.

"Then that means I'll get to see him again!" Sora jumped, punching the air.

"Who's Riku?" Hayner couldn't hold in his questions any longer.

"My best friend!" Sora replied, elated.

Hayner, Pence, and Olette smiled at one another to see him so glad.

"Um, Your Majesty?" Olette stepped forward, peering curiously at the king. "You got the purse with the crystal in it from Riku, didn't you?"

Conflict crossed King Mickey's face as he averted his eyes.

"And you promised not to tell?"

"...Gosh, fellas..." Caught out, he scratched his head.

"That doesn't matter now!" Donald blurted, in an attempt to cheer up the king.

"Right. Let's go!" Clenching his fists, Sora looked up at the haunted mansion. "Kairi, Riku... We're on our way!"

Riku and Naminé dashed through the Corridors of Darkness.

How many times had she run through these strange spaces now? Sometimes with Axel and sometimes with Riku...

But the time will come when I won't get to anymore, Naminé thought. How much longer do I have, existing as I am now?

And yet...I never really existed in the first place. I'm just a vague empty thing, a shadow of someone else.

What's Axel going to do now?

Axel... A Nobody full of sorrow.

But every Nobody ever born is full of sorrow. All of us.

Roxas, and Axel, and even Xemnas.

Why were we born at all?

We have no hearts. And in the end, we never could gain them.

Really? Is it really true that we have no hearts?

I think Axel must have been wondering the same thing.

But there is something like a heart inside us... Or maybe it's nothing more than an illusory feeling that awakened when we met Sora.

And yet... Even if it feels like we have hearts, a Nobody's real heart is somewhere else. Somewhere far away.

Are we just trying to go back there?



AXEL'S LAST STAND

CHAPTER 3

AXEL'S LAST STAND

THE HAUNTED MANSION WAS DIM AND HUSHED INSIDE. In the middle of the dusty foyer stood something that might have been a broken model of a castle.

"There's gotta be a computer here somewhere," said King Mickey, scanning the place.

"A computer? Is it connected to the other Twilight Town?" Pence wondered.

"It might be." The king nodded. "And there should be a way into the realm of darkness there."

"Did Riku tell you that?" Sora leaned over the king, looking him in the eye.

"Aw, Sora, don't make me answer. He'll get mad at me..."

"Aha! I knew it!"

While Sora hopped in place, unable to contain his excitement, King Mickey let out a deep sigh. Technically, Riku hadn't told him that, but he had mentioned that *something* was here in Twilight Town.

Maybe Riku already knew I'd end up breaking my promise to him, the king thought.

"Let's split up and search the place!" said Hayner, and Sora immediately rocketed up the big staircase from the foyer.

"Sora?!" exclaimed King Mickey, startled by his lack of hesitation.

"I bet it's this way!" Sora shouted back, then ran down the hallway on the second story.

"Wait for us!" Goofy chased after him. Everyone else followed.

"Say, Sora... How'd you know?" asked the king, as Sora stood in front of the door at the end of the hallway, waiting for the others.

"Um... Huh." Sora seemed mystified himself. "Just a guess?"

"Just a guess' means you *don't* know," Donald scoffed.

"But I think that computer's through here. I've got a feeling." With that, Sora opened the door.

Axel waited.

In the shadows of the spaces between, he waited for Sora... For Roxas.

"*Traitor*," Saïx had called him. But his betrayal of Organization XIII wasn't exactly a recent development, Axel thought with a bitter laugh.

It had begun back in Castle Oblivion. When Marluxia and Larxene conspired to steal Sora's memories, trying to take possession of him. No one could predict what Roxas would become, the Nobody created in such an unusual manner, born in the moment when his somebody Sora became something that was *not* Sora. Well, no—it was possible that Xemnas had some idea. Perhaps Vexen when he tried to tell Sora about Twilight Town and those close to him. Or all six original members of the organization.

The organization could hardly be called that anyway—this ragtag bunch of Nobodies united only by their desire for hearts. It was only natural that conflicts would arise between the newcomers like Marluxia and the six founding members, what with all the quarrels among the half of them posted in Castle Oblivion.

Axel had only acted to keep Sora alive—to keep Roxas alive. But thinking back on it now, maybe all he'd done was to play right into Xemnas's hands.

Agony racked his body. Saïx had dealt him a mortal blow, or close enough.

"Hurry up, Sora..., " he muttered, lifting his face to the nonexistent sky.

When Sora opened the door, he saw a room with books lining every wall, but in the middle were stairs leading down.

"This is..." The room was familiar somehow, he thought as he took it in. Spacious and square, it could have been a library or a study, and yet there was a chilly atmosphere that seemed out of place in the dusty old mansion.

"What is it?" asked King Mickey, following Sora inside.

"It just feels like..." He turned to Donald and Goofy. "Have I been here before?"

"Wak? I don't think so..." Donald crossed his arms.

"Gee, y'know," Goofy recalled, "when we woke up and left that funny room, didn't we end up outside this mansion?"

"Yeah! That's it! We must've...", Sora began excitedly, then trailed off when he saw that Goofy was concentrating, his arms also crossed. "Huh?"

"We didn't go into this room, though," Goofy said tentatively.

Sora frowned, feeling as if there was something terribly important

that he couldn't remember. "But...I just know...in here..."

"Maybe you came here while you were asleep?" said the king.

The trio looked at him.

"...While I was asleep?" Sora focused harder on his thoughts. He didn't know *what* it could be, but he felt something was important. Something so frustrating and sad... What was it?

Hayner was done listening patiently. He shoved himself into the conversation among King Mickey and the trio. "Look, I get that things are weird in here, but shouldn't we be trying to help Kairi?"

"Yeah. You're right!" Sora nodded and descended the stairs in the middle of the room, opening the door at the bottom.

Kairi sat on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, and Pluto licked her face.

"Do you think Axel's okay...?" she wondered.

Pluto's reply was a whimper.

She hid her face in her knees.

They are coming to help me. Axel... Sora and Riku... All of them.

But why are they keeping me here?

I've seen Axel get hurt twice, for my sake. And I couldn't do anything.

Axel's saved me so many times, but I can't help him...

So many times? Kairi caught herself. She'd only met him twice. Once when that other man had kidnapped her, and just now.

So why did she get the feeling that he'd helped her more times than that...?

In the room through this door they found a sizable computer setup.

"This is it!" King Mickey scurried over to it.

Donald stared dubiously in the direction of the keyboard. "How's it work?"

"I got this," said Pence, who had been mostly silent until now. He ambled over to the terminal and began poking around.

"Hey, Sora?" Goofy murmured, leaning close to him.

"What?"

"Doesn't this computer look kinda like the one in Hollow Bastion?"

Donald nodded, emphatically agreeing.

"Does it...?" Sora cocked his head.

Pence was already busy typing. "Uh-oh."

Seeing his expression, Hayner came closer. "What's wrong?"

"I can't go any further without the password..." Stumped, Pence gestured at the screen in frustration.

King Mickey, watching Pence's work intently, turned to the trio.
"Any ideas what it would be, fellas?"

"Sora!"

"Donald!"

"Goofy!"

They gave their names in order, which would be the same as the password for the computer in Hollow Bastion—or rather, in Radiant Garden.

"Nope, that's not it." Pence shook his head.

"Need a hint, need a clue..." Donald grumbled, then shoved his hand into his pocket. "The picture!"



He held up the photo of Roxas and the Twilight Town gang.

“Gawrsh, that’s the only clue we’ve got...?” Goofy folded his arms.

“Grr...rrr...wak! That salty-sweet ice cream!”

“The sea-salt ice cream?” said Sora.

“It was in the box with the photo,” Goofy explained to the king, who was listening anxiously.

“Ansem the Wise *did* like ice cream...,” King Mickey told them.

“...Sea-salt ice cream...?” Pence tried entering it as the password. “Bingo!”

A machine in the middle of the room began to glow.

“Let’s go!” said Sora.

“We’ll be here to hold down the fort,” Hayner said, as Sora was already moving toward the humming machine.

“Say hi to Kairi!” Olette added.

Sora turned back to her with a grin. “Sure will!”

Then the trio leaped into the strange glow.

Beyond the light, they found themselves in the same room as the one where they’d just been standing.

“Huh? We’re back in the same place?” Sora cocked his head.

“Wak!” With a hop, Donald pointed to the computer.

It was the same as the one they had just seen—but someone had smashed this one.

“Roxas...,” Sora murmured. He went to the broken computer and lightly touched the cracked glass of the screen.

I remember this.

Roxas was here, and he smashed the computer with his Keyblade. He was sad—he was hurt, he was furious. He couldn’t forgive what they’d done.

What? What was it?

I don’t know. At least, not yet.

“Sora?” King Mickey said anxiously, as Sora stood there with his fingertips to the screen, his eyes closed.

But when he spoke, his voice was clear and certain. “This is the other Twilight Town... Roxas’s Twilight Town.”

“There’s gotta be a way into the realm of darkness somewhere,” said the king.

Sora turned away from the computer and nodded. He knew where to find that entrance, too.

It was in the next room...the bare rectangular one.

He opened the door, and in the corner, he saw something like a hole in the air, a splotch of gloomy blackness.

“There...” Sora stared at the widening dark rupture.

“This is it,” said King Mickey.

Sora nodded—and launched himself straight into the portal.

Axel looked up, sensing a ripple in the strange space.

Sora was almost here. “Riku! Kairi!” the boy called, his voice still far off.

Axel ambled toward it.

He could hardly feel the pain anymore. And it wasn’t that the wound was healing—no, this was just the end coming closer.

Before he reached Sora and the other two, Nobodies appeared in his way.

“Really, Saïx...?”

Number 7 had probably sent them—but whether to finish him off or to keep that trio from coming any farther, Axel wasn’t sure.

In the murky distance, he could hear them clashing with the Nobodies.

Axel took a single deep breath and called the chakrams to his hands.

Then he sprang into the air.

“Don’t stop moving! Or the darkness will overtake you!”

Sora and the others tore their eyes away from their fight for a moment, and there was Axel, blasting aside Nobodies.

He might not want to destroy Nobodies, but there was no point in having any misgivings now. The end would be the same either way.

Throwing a glance at Sora, he shouted, “Get going!”

“What? Why?”

They didn’t move but only stared at him.

“Don’t worry about that! Just go!” A Nobody glommed on to his arm, but Axel shook it off and hurled a chakram at it.

Right. Don’t worry about the why. I don’t even know the answer myself.

As he tried to catch his breath, more Nobodies set upon him. Pain surged like a fresh blow from the wound Saïx had dealt him.

“Are you okay?!” Beating back the Nobodies, Sora ran to him where he’d fallen.

Axel looked up at Sora. “I...kidnapped Kairi. But she got away from me. And after that...Saïx caught her. He’s a member of Organization XIII. Saïx—got it memorized? Now go save her!”

As he finished speaking, a single Nobody lunged at Sora.

“Ugh, leave us alone!” The Keyblade gleamed in Sora’s hand, and he dispatched the Nobody with a single slash.

Axel struggled to his feet, back-to-back with Sora, and readied his

chakrams. He could feel Sora's heat against him, the hint of sweat. It reminded him of Roxas.

Sora leaped back into the fight. In the same moment, Axel sprang up with his chakrams in hand. Donald cast a barrage of spells, and Goofy ran to and fro bashing at the Nobodies.

But no matter how many they eliminated, more Nobodies poured out as if from some inexhaustible source.

Axel could remember fighting like this beside Roxas...

He wanted to fight that way again. He wished they had talked more, about lots of things. About nothing. He wanted to talk to his friend again.

But why do I feel this way if Nobodies have no hearts?

His time was running out, thanks to Saix. He could hardly move anymore.

"Think I liked it better when they were on my side," Axel remarked with half a grin.

Sora noticed the expression and smiled back. "So, you learned your lesson?"

"What lesson?" Axel shot him a look. "I can handle these things. Watch this!"

There was no longer any need for hesitation, or escape, or uncertainty.

Everything was for Sora, for Roxas...for all of them.

With a running leap, Axel plunged into the Nobody horde.

Nobodies were supposed to disappear. To go back to where they'd come from.

Where we came from... Where we belong. Axel hoped that was with Sora. With Roxas.

He spread his arms wide and turned his face upward.

The last of your strength... Give it to me.

Share with me the strength for the end...Roxas.

Flames blazed all around him, surging into an immense wave of fire to sear through the Nobodies.

"Whoa!" Sora marveled, running to him.

But when Sora reached him, Axel no longer had the strength to stand or even move his arms. Tiny flames smoldered in the air—more like dying embers.

"You're...fading away..." Sora knelt down to peer anxiously into his eyes.

"Well, yeah, that's what happens when you throw your whole being into an attack... Didn't have any better ideas." A smirk curled one corner of Axel's mouth as he looked up at Sora. Or tried. His sight was already going dark. "Not that a Nobody like me really *has* a being to speak of. But never mind... Look, go find Kairi, okay?"

Sora was fixed on him, barely blinking.

"Oh yeah...almost forgot," said Axel. "I'm sorry for what I did to her."

"If you feel that way, then tell her yourself!" Sora scolded him.

"I'll have to pass... My heart just wouldn't be in it, y'know? Haven't got one..." Axel laughed dryly.

I have no heart. I'm not even supposed to exist... So why am I doing all this? His thoughts rambled. It was all so funny. He only *felt* like he had a heart. But no matter what he did—outside of obtaining Kingdom Hearts—he could never have one.

"What were you trying to do?" Sora asked.

For a moment, Axel didn't reply. He kept staring into space as he did. "...I wanted to see Roxas."

That's it. That's all it is.

"He...was the only one I liked."

I liked him, that's all.

"When I was with him...he made me feel...like I had a heart..." Axel closed his eyes. Somehow, he had the feeling that Roxas was close.

Terribly close. Right beside him.

"I feel it...with you, too..." Then Axel weakly shook his head and returned his attention to Sora. "Kairi's in the castle dungeon. Now go."

This was well and truly the last of his strength. The final reserves of whatever held him together. Axel lifted his hand and opened a portal to the Corridors of Darkness.

"Axel...", he heard Sora saying.

And all the strength fled from his body.

If I wake up...I hope I can see Roxas.

I just want to see him again.

No—I know I will.

Roxas... Hey, wake up. Are you really in there?

Didn't we promise...we'd meet again in the next life?

We were best friends. Weren't we?

And then Axel faded from existence, vanishing into nothing.

A promise...

We'll meet again...in the next life.

We did say that.

I remember.

I remember our promise.

In the world that awaited them, through the dark rift that Axel had

spent his last ounce of power to open, an enormous heart-shaped moon hung in the sky. King Mickey stood under its silvery light.

“Your Majesty...!” The trio dashed up to him.

He turned to face them with his arms open wide as if to greet them with a hug. “I was afraid you fellas wouldn’t make it!”

Sora, Donald, and Goofy looked at one another and all hung their heads.

The man whose life had faded in front of them was an organization member, an enemy—and yet his passing filled them with sorrow.

Deep in Sora’s chest, an insistent agitation was clamoring, and he bit down on his lip.

“Did somethin’ happen?” asked the king.

“Axel helped us...,” said Goofy, still staring despondently at the ground.

“Oh, I’ve met him. Where’d he go?” Intrigued, King Mickey leaned toward them.

“He helped us, and now...he’s gone.” Sora couldn’t meet the king’s eyes.

“You mean...” The king lowered his gaze, too. “Oh no...”

“He was a Nobody in the organization...but he still...,” Sora mumbled.

“And he helped me out one time before...” Goofy’s voice was heavy with sadness.

“Gee... Maybe Axel was tryin’ to help us the whole time.” King Mickey turned away and raised his eyes to the heart-shaped moon shining over the skyscrapers with their own neon glow.

Sora followed suit. “We’ve gotta help Kairi.”

“Then let’s go!” The king ran in the moon’s direction. But as the others moved to do the same, Nobodies blocked their way.

“Sora!” Donald and Goofy called out from behind him.

Sora turned to see that Nobodies were already upon them. “Donald! Goofy!”

But as he tried to reach them, the world blurred around him...

“Huh?” Sora whirled around. A man in a black cloak appeared there, striding toward him between the looming skyscrapers.

Light gathered at the man’s hand, and what took shape there was...

“A Keyblade?!”

Then the mysterious figure was dashing straight at Sora, Keyblade at the ready, and struck.

Sora blocked it with his own. “Who are you?!”

He hadn't imagined anyone in the organization would have a Keyblade.

"A denizen of the darkness," was the cloaked man's answer, and he lashed out with his Keyblade again.

This time, Sora knocked him back. "You can't be...Riku?!"

"Riku... That was his name. The one I defeated." The man leaped up, and their Keyblades clashed.

Defeated? Is Riku okay?!

But Sora had no chance to ask. The clang of metal against metal rang out over and over, until finally they both stepped back for a breath.

"Tell me... Tell me why *you're* the chosen one!" the other man said through gritted teeth and darted in past Sora's guard.

Whoever this person was, he was stronger than anyone Sora had fought before. Yes—maybe even stronger than Riku.

He knocked Sora's weapon from his hand. Sora dashed to where it had fallen on the ground—but his opponent beat him to it, planting himself in the way.

The man already had his own Keyblade, and now he picked up Sora's, studying it.

Sora let out a hiss of frustration. He couldn't win. This man's power was overwhelming.

But he couldn't lose now.

He had to help Kairi...and find Riku.

Just as Sora raised his head, glaring at the man with determination, the Keyblade glowed and disappeared from his hand, returning to Sora's.

"What?!" the man started.

Sora jumped to his feet and this time dealt a strike that disarmed his opponent. When the Keyblade hit the ground, it turned to a flash of light and faded.

The man turned away. "So that's why. Sora." Then his hood fell back, and Sora could see his boyishly styled hair glinting gold. "You make a good somebody..."

It was Roxas. He glanced back at Sora once before he vanished.

In Twilight Town, the evening sun sank toward the horizon. Roxas was perched on the ledge, high up on the clock tower, watching the sunset and thinking of nothing in particular. He liked to sit up here where he could see the whole town.

"Finally awake, huh?"

Roxas looked up. "Axel..."

His only good friend—his best friend—Axel had arrived with two

sea-salt ice cream pops.

“Or maybe you’re about to fall asleep. We won’t have long to talk like this—just our minds.” Axel took a seat beside Roxas and handed him an ice cream.

“I’m going back... Back to how I used to be, aren’t I?”

Instead of answering, Axel bit into his ice cream and gazed into the sunset. “I’ve been thinking—and Naminé was saying this, too... You do have a heart, don’t you, Roxas? And me and Naminé—do we *really* have no hearts?”

Roxas lowered his eyes and also started in on his ice cream. “That’s... I don’t know, either. But Sora will find out.”

With that, he took another bite. Sweet, salty, cold.

The same ice cream he’d always enjoyed sitting on the clock tower like this, with Hayner and Pence and Olette.

And...with Axel. Here eating ice cream.

Had he come here with Hayner and the others to have ice cream because he’d done the same here with Axel? Or was it the other way around? He couldn’t quite tell.

“But...a heart isn’t something you can see,” Roxas said aloud. “I’m starting to think it must be something you feel. So, then... Well, never mind.”

“Hmm? What?” Axel prompted. “You’re just getting to the important stuff.”

Beside him, Roxas kept staring at the sunset. “Sora will find the answers. Because he’s me.”

A smile came to his face then.

“Yeah. You’re right.” Axel smiled, too. “Hey, still got it memorized? When we first met, the day you got your name—we watched the sunset from here just like this.”

Roxas gave a tiny nod.

He hadn’t thought he would get to have ice cream here with Axel one more time at the end. He hadn’t expected they would get to watch the sunset together.

The sea-salt ice cream tasted just like he remembered. The setting sun over Twilight Town was always so serene.

No matter how much misery or pain he was in, the light here was warm and gentle, Roxas thought.

“I’d better go.” He stood up. “Sora is waiting.”

“Oh. Right... You really can taste the sea salt in this, huh?” Axel turned away, his shoulders shaking.

If he had no heart, then what were these feelings welling up in his chest supposed to be?

Sorrow and...happiness?

Axel didn’t have a handle on it. But maybe not understanding

these things was part of having a heart.

“See you, Axel,” Roxas told him.

He looked over his shoulder.

It was a promise.

Like we promised to meet again in the next life. We’ll make another promise.

“See you, partner,” said Axel.

Roxas gave him one last smile and vanished into the air.

Moments later, Axel did the same.

“Sora!”

“Huh?” Suddenly, there were people calling him. He straightened his body.

“Are you okay?”

Sora turned to find Donald and Goofy watching him with concern.

“What just...happened to me?”

“Gawrsh, I dunno,” said Goofy. “You just disappeared, and me and Donald had to fight those Nobodies...”

“Oh...” Sora looked up at the neon-lit buildings. “He said...he defeated Riku.”

“Who said that?” Donald stepped closer, peering into Sora’s face.

“That guy. In the black cloak.” Sora’s distracted gaze didn’t waver from the skyscrapers.

Then Goofy leaned in, too. “Ya think anybody *could* defeat Riku?”

“Yeah...I guess not.” Sora shook his head.

Riku wouldn’t lose to anyone. But still... That guy was really strong. What if— What if...?

“A black cloak means Organization XIII. I bet he was tryin’ to trick ya,” said Goofy, trying to cheer him up.

“That must be why we didn’t see him,” Donald added.

That startled Sora. “Wha—?”

No one else had seen the man...? But then...

“Maybe you’re just tired, Sora,” said Goofy.

He didn’t reply and only regarded the skyscrapers one last time.

“C’mon, we gotta find a way into that castle!” Donald reminded them.

“Yeah! And help Kairi!” said Goofy.

Sora nodded and finally began to move, but Donald ran ahead.

“Huh? Hey, Donald!”

Sora and Goofy scrambled to catch up and found that Donald had led them to the king. “Your Majesty!”

King Mickey was standing at the edge of a cliff, where the road between the skyscrapers simply ended.

Beyond it, right beneath the heart-shaped moon, floated an enormous castle.

“A dead end...?” Sora observed the far-off castle.

King Mickey squinted resolutely in the same direction. “There’s gotta be a path somewhere.”

Somewhere deep in the castle looming over Sora and his friends...was Kairi, with Pluto sitting protectively by her side.

What can I possibly do...?

She started at the sound of footsteps approaching. Through the bars of the cage, she saw Saïx.

“What are you going to do with us?” she demanded.

Saïx narrowed his eyes. “You are the fire that feeds Sora’s anger.”

That was all he said. And then he vanished again.

“I have to do something...,” Kairi murmured. “Sora’s in danger because of me...”

Then Pluto jumped up, barking at the back of the cage.

“Huh?” Before she realized it, she was on her feet, too, and she saw a hole in the air like the one Pluto had come through—a portal to the darkness.

“This way!” It was another girl’s voice. She floated into view inside the portal—a girl with flaxen hair, wearing a white dress.

“Who...?”

“Just believe in yourself. Come on—hurry!”

Naminé stretched out her pale hand from the portal, and Kairi clasped it. Light surrounded the two of them and shot upward through the castle into the sky.

“Are you...?” Kairi began uncertainly.

Naminé smiled. “I’m okay.”

The light seemed to shine through the whole world.

“Sora!” shouted Donald.

One corner of the great floating castle was engulfed in brilliant light. The Keyblade, too, flickered as if in reply.

“Is that...?” Sora lifted the Keyblade, and the ensuing beam from its tip took shape as a path through the air—one that would take them to the castle.

“Kairi... We’re almost there,” he murmured, watching where the light would lead them.

Kairi and Naminé ran down the stairs.

I’m...still okay, Naminé told herself. I’m not disappearing yet. I’m

still okay.

Then they came to a halt.

“Naminé... There you are.”

It was Saïx again, blocking their way, with a passel of Nobody minions. Naminé gave him a silent glare.

“I’m afraid leaving is not an option, Kairi.” Saïx offered her his hand. “I’ll take you to Sora.”

Kairi hid her hands behind her back in unmistakable refusal.

“You don’t want to see him?” said Saïx.

“I do. More than anything. But not with *you* around.” She steeled herself to fight. Naminé did the same beside her.

“If I had a heart, this would be where I fall over laughing,” he remarked.

And then something swept aside the Nobodies behind him. Saïx whirled to see a black-cloaked man with a sword, his hood pulled down over his face.

“You... Didn’t Roxas take care of you?” Saïx spat.

“You can take it from here, Riku,” said Naminé.

The man nodded, his face hidden, as Kairi stared at him in disbelief—then he rushed at Saïx and slammed him back against the wall.

“Hmph...,” Saïx sniffed, opening a dark portal behind him, and simply faded into it.

The other man tried to leap in after him, but Kairi moved first. “Wait!” she cried.

Not a second later, Pluto bounded up to him, tail wagging, and as the man backed away, the portal closed before his eyes.

He stood frozen, and Kairi approached, slow and careful.

“Riku... I missed you.” She reached up for his hood.

Beneath it she found Xehanort—or rather, Riku in the form of Xehanort.

“Why...?” she had to ask.

Riku said nothing, only looked at her.

But then Kairi felt something in the air tremble. She spun around, and—

Naminé and Pluto were gone.



MEET AGAIN

CHAPTER 4

MEET AGAIN

THEY FOLLOWED THE PATH OF LIGHT TO THE GATES of the massive, angular castle. Nobodies and Heartless promptly circled them—in droves.

“We just have to get through this!” Sora’s Keyblade descended.

“Huh? Where’s the king...?” Donald glanced around the vicinity but found no trace of him.

“Gawrsh, he must’ve run ahead again,” said Goofy, not a bit worried about their king.

“We should be running, too!” said Sora, and so they did.

By now, they had taken down a good deal of enemies. The ones they found here were a decent warm-up but not too difficult to handle.

But that revelation about the Heartless still troubled Sora—was it really okay to destroy any more of them?

If they didn’t take down what sought to harm them, they would be destroyed themselves. He understood that, and yet doubts still nagged at him. What if their efforts were actually contributing to the destruction of the worlds...? Still, if they didn’t fight the Heartless, those same Heartless would destroy the worlds.

Filled with uncertainty, Sora clenched his fist around the Keyblade.

“You’re doing well, Sora,” someone remarked.

From the passageways winding around outside the castle, they’d arrived in a soaring great hall, and the voice had come from above them. There was a high mezzanine around the edges of the room with an elaborate platform that might have been a stage.

“Where’s Kairi?!” Sora shouted toward the voice.

Saïx looked down at them from the stage. “Kairi...? Oh, I expect she’s catching up with her friend from the darkness,” he said as if it were nothing of much concern.

“What’s that mean?!” Sora demanded.

“She doesn’t need you anymore.” Saïx smiled, but the expression didn’t reach his eyes.

That was the world's most obvious lie, Sora thought. He'd had about enough of these organization guys trying to tell him what was what. "Like I'm supposed to believe that?" Sora shot back.

"Well, that's up to you. But you can believe this: Organization XIII has no more use for you." Saïx lifted his hand to point at the strange moon hanging in the sky above the glass ceiling. "Just look there—our Kingdom Hearts. Thanks to you, we've collected countless hearts... Can you hear their euphoria? And now, all they need is one more helping hand from the Keyblade wielder!"

He snapped his fingers.

Darkness seeped into the walls around them, and Heartless poured out.

"We gotta fight!" Donald called with his wand ready.

"But...Kingdom Hearts will..." Sora averted his eyes.

If they kept destroying Heartless, and those hearts only fed Kingdom Hearts...they would just be helping the organization. And he didn't want to simply go along with their plans.

But then—

"Sora!" someone called out.

He knew that voice.

His head snapped up at the sound, and there, on the mezzanine opposite from Saïx, leaning out from a balcony was...Kairi.

"Sora! Oh, it's really you!"

"Kairi!" he shouted back—and the Heartless swarmed over him, hiding him from view.

"You get away from him!" Kairi shouted—and she took a running leap down from the balcony.

Heartless mobbed her, too, closing in on her in a swarm.

"Sora..." Her voice was too quiet. But a flash of light came to her aid. "Huh...?"

It was Xehanort-Riku, taking her arm to pull her to her feet. Driven back, the Heartless faded away.

Riku offered her a sword—no, a Keyblade. "Take it."

"Yeah. This time...I'll fight." She closed her fingers around the glowing weapon. It called to her, to the strength in her heart, and it too wanted her to join the fray. "C'mon—you know Sora's hopeless without us! Let's go, Riku!"

She dashed again into the swarm of Heartless, and Riku was right behind her.

Saïx watched them from above—Sora joined by Kairi and Riku.

Meanwhile, two more teams of intruders had invaded the stronghold.

"Well, well, Pete... This is a splendid castle. Perhaps we should

acquire it.”

Maleficent took in the surroundings, looking quite charmed. Pete stood beside her on the balcony opposite from Saix.

“I guess the setup is kinda nice, but... What about all the Heartless?” said Pete, a bit unnerved. “This funny in-between world’s too close to the darkness! They ain’t gonna listen to us here!”

“Oh, but you underestimate me.” Maleficent smiled as if victory were already in her grasp as she gazed upon the castle’s architecture.

Somewhere higher up in the castle was the other pair—or rather, another man, who had collapsed beneath a throng of enemies. But then the king arrived to scatter the Heartless and slash through the Nobodies.

Beside him, a mysterious, unwieldy device had tumbled to the floor.

DiZ tried to stand but lurched to his knees again as if badly hurt, his red cape fluttering.

“Hold on...!”

With the king’s help, he got to his feet and focused on Kingdom Hearts in the sky.

He unwrapped the strips of red cloth that hid his face—and the face he revealed was that of Ansem the Wise. “It’s been too long, my friend.”

King Mickey regarded him sternly. “Ansem the Wise. Why didn’t you come to me before things got so bad?”

Ansem regarded the great moon of Kingdom Hearts again as he replied. “Xemnas, the organization’s leader, is the Nobody of Xehanort, my foremost apprentice. The burden was mine to bear.”

“Is that all?” King Mickey pressed.

Avoiding his gaze, Ansem turned away. “I won’t deny there was more. I was...obsessed with thoughts of revenge. My apprentices stole everything from me—my research, my pride.” His voice was heavy with regret.

“I can’t help you with revenge,” the king said at Ansem’s back.

“I know. Riku told me the same a thousand times.”

Hearing his friend’s name, King Mickey had to interrogate further. “Where is Riku?”

“He must be with his friends by now... He was a great help to me.” Finally, Ansem turned back to look his friend in the eye. “I found him wandering after you, and we lost track of each other, but—”

“No, we didn’t lose each other exactly,” King Mickey cut in. “Riku just left on his own. Xehanort’s Heartless was still inside his heart. And it must’ve been hurting him a lot. But what I don’t understand is why he looks the way he does now, when in his heart he’s still Riku...”

Ansem took a slow, deep breath before telling King Mickey the whole story.

"I am to blame. When I first met Riku, he still had his own form, a boy's form—likely because he had such a strong heart. I asked him to find a young man named Roxas from Organization XIII and bring him to me. When I told him it would help awaken Sora from his slumber, Riku left without another word. He fought Roxas, and I can only surmise he lost that fight. Riku must have realized it then—to fight in a world of darkness, he would have to immerse himself in darkness. And when he did...well, the results were as you saw. When Riku brought Roxas back to me, he gave his own name as Ansem. If that was what it took to save his friend, he was willing to become a denizen of the darkness. *Riku* was the victim of my revenge."

After that long speech, Ansem paused as though he'd run out of words. King Mickey stepped closer to him.

"...Ah, how my heart ached." Despite Ansem's words, his expression was calm now as he looked down at the king. "I could only laugh to hide my shame..."

"It musta been after that when I saw Riku again," said the king. "And he made me promise him— He told me he wanted to help Sora, but he made me promise never to let Sora find out what happened to him."

Ansem closed his eyes for a moment, his face ruefully turned down, and then spoke again. "My friend... The time has come. I must make amends to these young people for the suffering I've caused."

He hoisted up the device that sat by his feet, then continued on his way through the castle. King Mickey followed his lead.

He could hear Kairi's voice...

And Donald's. "Sora! Hold on!"

"Ugh, get *off*!" Sora shoved away the Heartless clambering on him and got to his feet. Up on the balcony opposite from the platform Saïx had just occupied, he could see Kairi and Xehanort fighting more Heartless. "What's going on?!"

Kairi held a weapon... It looked like a Keyblade. And the man in black beside her was Ansem— *No*, Sora corrected himself. *That's Xehanort.*

Why were those two fighting together...?

As Sora hesitated, something like knives of light—a whole volley of them—tore through the Heartless around him.

"Who's there?!"

He whipped his body around, and low, scornful laughter echoed through the hall.

“Have you been a good boy?” said the mocking voice.

“Show yourself!” Sora demanded.

And there on the elaborate stage, an organization man stepped out of the darkness. His black hair was streaked with white, and an eyepatch covered his right eye. His features were sharp and cold. “Oh, it sounds like you haven’t, Sora—or actually, Roxas!”

“Roxas?” Startled, Sora turned back to his friends. “Did that guy just call me Roxas?”

Donald gave him an emphatic nod.

“You’ve really got Organization XIII up against the wall here,” said Xigbar. “Well, I guess that must be why the Keyblade chose you. But *man*, did it ever pick a dud this time. You’re not half the hero the others were.”

“Are you done rambling?” Sora retorted.

“Me, ramble? Well...maybe I am. The point is, your time is up, traitor.”

Xigbar leaped down from the stage, landing not far from Sora.

“Look out, Sora!” Goofy called.

Xigbar loomed over Sora, bringing his face uncomfortably close.

“What’s your problem?!” Sora jumped back, readying the Keyblade.

Xigbar laughed. “Those blue, blue eyes... They just give me such a thrill!”

“What are you talking about?”

In each hand, Xigbar gripped something like a blade with myriad small knives attached—the Arrowguns. “Let’s dance, kiddo.”

The blades on the Arrowguns glowed and shot at Sora.

“*Whoa!*” Sora knocked them aside with the Keyblade as he charged at Xigbar.

“Take this!” Donald let his magic fly, and the knives of light disintegrated.

“Sora! Keep steady!” called Goofy as his shield blocked the knives.

But as the fight went on, another figure watched from above.

“Looks like they’re in a tough spot...” King Mickey looked down on the fierce battle, as he and Ansem had followed the path to a higher level of the great hall. “Maybe we should help.”

Ansem glanced back at him. “Sora and Riku are together now. We have no part to play here.”

“Gee, I wonder if Riku will ever change back...,” the king murmured, hurrying to catch up with Ansem.

“Riku chose that form so that he could use the power of darkness.” Ansem’s brows drew together in concern or perhaps guilt.

“Getting rid of it won’t be so easy.”

King Mickey shook his head sadly and followed Ansem.

“Y’know, I don’t have time for you!” Sora complained as he leaped at Xigbar. “I’m going to find Kairi!”

He swung the Keyblade ferociously at one of the Arrowguns flying from Xigbar’s hand.

Xigbar chuckled, deflecting a blow to his body, and jumped back. “Well, you *are* the Keyblade wielder, after all,” he said under his breath and brushed at his mouth. “Guess I shouldn’t underestimate you, even if you are a dud, Roxas.”

He aimed his remaining Arrowgun.

“I’m *Sora*!” Before Xigbar could fire the knives, Sora dashed in with all his might and knocked the other weapon from the man’s grasp, and then a spell from Donald exploded in Xigbar’s face.

“Sora!” Goofy called, charging with his shield raised to smash Xigbar’s jaw.

Xigbar sailed through the air. Sora ran to where he sprawled on the floor and brought down the Keyblade. “Why’re you calling me Roxas?!” he demanded.

“Heh-heh... Wouldn’t you like to know.” Xigbar’s body dissipated into a black mist.

Sora looked down at the faint dark blotches he left behind. *All these guys calling me Roxas—I’m really getting sick of this! It doesn’t make any sense!*

“Sora!” Donald called. “It’s Kairi!”

Forgetting about all of that, Sora turned the other way. “Kairi! We’re coming!”

And he ran to her.

Innumerable small hearts floated into the sky to be absorbed into Kingdom Hearts.

Bathed in the glow, Xemnas pushed back his hood and took in the sight. “Yes... Kingdom Hearts! Rejoice and feast on all we offer! Shine your pale light on this empty realm and share your power with us, the Nobodies...!”

Saïx appeared behind him. “Xemnas. Is Kingdom Hearts ready?”

Xemnas faced him with narrowed eyes. “Very soon.”

At that, something relaxed in Saïx’s expression. “So, I can end this?”

“...As you will.” Xemnas turned his back on Saïx, raising his eyes to Kingdom Hearts once more.

“How I’ve longed to hear that.” Saïx vanished from the scene.

They defeated more and more Heartless, but wave upon wave replaced them, gushing endlessly out from the dark. Swinging her Keyblade, Kairi slashed through them until the last one remaining in front of her had dissolved into nothing.

“Wow! Nice work, Kairi!”

At the praise from Donald, she paused, then slowly faced them with a smile spreading on her face.

Sora, Donald, and Goofy were staring at her in undisguised awe.

“Kairi... It’s so good to see you.” Sora grinned back.

At the sight of his joyful expression, Riku’s eyes narrowed as he smiled, too.

“You and Riku never came home, so I went looking for you,” said Kairi.

Sora and Kairi stepped closer to each other in tandem.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. Riku still wasn’t back...

Just as he averted his eyes, Kairi launched herself at him.

“You’re not a dream...” Her arms wrapped tight around him.

Sora stalled in confusion for the briefest moment before his own arms returned the hug.

Looking on, Donald and Goofy couldn’t help but grin.

But there was one more person—Riku—who turned away and started walking off.

He couldn’t linger with them anymore. He didn’t want Sora to see him like this and realize it was him.

“Wait—Ansem!” Letting go of Kairi, Sora called after the man in black. “I mean, Xehanort’s Heartless—I never thought for a second we’d ever see *you* again. Just thinking about all the things you did make me so angry...”

Riku’s steps came to a halt.

“But...but you saved Kairi, didn’t you?” Sora went on. “I have to be grateful for that. So—thanks.”

Instead of looking back, Riku resumed his steps with his head lowered.

Kairi ran up behind him and flung her arms around him. “Riku! Don’t go!”

Sora froze. “Kairi... What’d you just say?”

She tugged the man’s arm and said the name again. “Riku.”



"I'm no one. Only a dweller of the darkness." He gently brushed Kairi away and tried again to escape.

"Sora, come over here," Kairi pleaded. "Say something to him."

Mystified, Sora approached Riku.

"Here—you'll understand." Kairi took Sora's hand and joined it with Riku's. "Close your eyes."

He did as she said, and in the darkness, he could feel the warmth of their hands.

An image floated up behind his closed eyes... Riku. It was him.

"...Riku..." Sora looked up, holding tight to his friend's hand. "It's Riku... Riku is *here*."

He knew that it was Riku's hand he clasped. It was bigger than the one he'd held a thousand times before, but in his heart, Sora felt it.

A knot of something he could barely define swelled in his chest. Clinging to that hand, to Riku's hand, Sora fell to his knees.

"I was looking for you...!" Tears spilled over and flowed down his cheeks as he pressed Riku's hand against his face.

How long had he been searching? How badly had he wanted to see Riku, to talk to him again?

And Riku was here. Here at last.

I found you. Finally. I missed you. I've missed you for so long...

They'd been separated on Destiny Island, then they ended up fighting, and then they'd gone through that door together from opposite sides...and he'd been searching, searching for Riku all the while.

"C'mon, Sora," Riku chided him lightly. "Keep it together."

He looked up, his sight blurred with tears, into the face that wasn't Riku's. It was Ansem's—no, Xehanort's face. But there was no doubt. He felt Riku's presence through their clasped hands.

"I looked *everywhere* for you...!"

Riku stared down at Sora, still kneeling, still clutching his hand. "I didn't want you to find me."

Stung, Sora lowered his eyes again.

"But it was him helpin' us all along, wasn't it?" Goofy said cheerfully.

Baffled, Donald cocked his head. "*Quack?!*"

"Y'know, all those clues we kept findin'. The photo and the sea-salt ice cream... I bet it was Riku." Goofy watched him for a reaction.

The photo, the ice cream... And that probably wasn't all, Sora thought. I felt Riku in the Land of Dragons and in the Beast's castle.

I could feel him all along. But I was never sure of it.

For so long, I didn't know if he was alive, if I'd get to see him again.

"I was starting to worry you guys would never catch on," Riku

said with a touch of amusement. "Even with all my hints, it was still you three, after all..."

"What's *that* s'posed to mean?!" Donald protested.

Sora got to his feet and blurted, "But why didn't you let me know you were okay?!"

Riku averted his eyes, unable to meet the demanding stare Sora fixed on him. "...I told you. I didn't want you to see me. Not...like this." He looked down at his open hands. "I fought Ansem's—or Xehanort's darkness when it invaded my heart. And I won. But to use the power of that darkness, I had to become him myself..."

"Does that mean you can't change back?" Kairi asked cautiously.

"This fight isn't over yet," said Riku. "Until it is, I still need the power of darkness."

"Then let's finish it!" Sora's voice was full of determination. He flashed a smile at his friend in a different form. "You're still Riku, no matter what."

It doesn't matter what he looks like. Riku is okay. I'm so glad he's okay. And I found him again.

More tears were welling up in his eyes. Trying not to let Riku notice, he turned to Donald and Goofy. "So, how 'bout it? Are we ready for one last rumble together? The king's waiting!"

"Yeah!" Donald agreed a bit louder than necessary. "Let's get going!"

"...Thank goodness," Naminé murmured weakly, her hand at her chest.

It was getting hard to breathe. Her right hand looked hazy.

Naminé stood high above Sora and the others from where King Mickey and Ansem the Wise had just been.

Sora and Riku had found each other. With those two fighting side by side, there was nothing to be afraid of.

"I wonder if Roxas really managed to find his way back into Sora..."

She turned to Pluto beside her, staring up at her with what could only be worry.

When a Nobody meets their somebody...that Nobody will disappear.

But not really—they just go back to the place they belong.

Axel must have returned somewhere when he disappeared.

I hope...I hope Roxas is there, too.

But it was an impossible wish.

Pluto whined anxiously at her.

"It's okay. I'm not afraid." She knelt down and hugged Pluto tight.

I think...there's still something I have to do.

Then Naminé walked away.



WAY TO THE DAWN

CHAPTER 5

WAY TO THE DAWN

THE HEARTS KEPT FLOATING UP TO THE SKY, where they joined with Kingdom Hearts—all the hearts from the Heartless that Sora and his friends had eliminated.

With every fallen Heartless, Kingdom Hearts only glowed brighter over the strange realm.

Reaching a balcony in the back of the castle, King Mickey and Ansem the Wise raised their eyes to the shining heart-shaped moon. There was only emptiness here between them and its light and nothing else to illuminate them.

“This place should do.” Ansem set down the huge device he carried.

“So what’s that gadget for?” asked the king.

“It’s a device to absorb Kingdom Hearts and encode it as data.” He examined his enormous target again.

Puzzled, King Mickey turned to the device. “Gee, I’m...not sure I get it.”

“I can’t claim to know the outcome of this venture, either. We are dealing with hearts, after all—unpredictable at best.” Ansem aimed the end of the device at Kingdom Hearts.

The one great heart—Kingdom Hearts.

But what *was* a heart?

For all that, I never did find the answer, Ansem thought.

When a person’s heart was taken from them, a Heartless was created, a thing with no sense of self, while the body and soul left behind would become the makings of a Nobody.

But what if someone deliberately released their heart from their body through the strength of will alone? Sora and Xehanort had managed to retain their selfhood even after becoming Heartless.

Plus, there were Kairi and Naminé to consider. Unlike most, Kairi had harbored no darkness within her heart. Not only that, once her heart had been freed, it had migrated to a new vessel—Sora. Two abnormalities in one person, both theoretically impossible.

And yet, the existence of the heart itself was an impossible

irregularity to begin with, exactly what Ansem's theories could not explain. The heart—and Kingdom Hearts.

The best we can do is to surmise the gist of it, he thought. And this device, which I only made based on that guesswork—how much effect will it have?

Ansem switched on the device, and light streaked from it toward Kingdom Hearts.

Sora could see the beam stretching up toward the great moon. "What's that?"

"The king and DiZ—I mean, Ansem the Wise. They must be higher up," said Riku. "Let's hurry."

With a nod, Sora kept going.

He had never imagined that just being with Riku—fighting alongside him—would give him so much strength. He'd hoped and wished that he would be able to reunite with Riku and have him as an ally, and yet he hadn't expected that desire to come true. Riku didn't look like himself now—but it didn't matter. Sora was so glad to be near him again.

"Let's go!" A little bashful for some reason, he broke into a run.

Riku and the others moved to do the same. But darkness rose in the air between them.

Instinctively, Sora whipped around and found himself face-to-face with another organization member.

Luxord raised his hand, and a barrier of enormous cards materialized to cut him off from his friends.

"You!" Sora had the Keyblade in his hand. He'd be fighting alone.

"Let's make this quick." Luxord smirked, and more cards whirled and scattered, hiding him.

Sora couldn't tell where he was. "That's not fair!" He slashed through the cards one after another, splitting them in half, but couldn't reach Luxord.

"Sora!" he could hear Riku calling from beyond the wall.

"Riku! What should I do?"

"Reality isn't only what you can see with your eyes," said Riku. "Feel out the truth. I know you can."

Sora closed his eyes.

If he believed only in what his vision showed him, he would never have found Riku. He wouldn't have known it *was* Riku.

So, if Riku said he could...then he could do it. He could discern what was real.

"There!" Sora jumped up and brought the Keyblade down on one particular card. And behind that card was something of substance to

strike.

"Roxas... How could you...?" Luxord grated, collapsing to his knees.

"That's *Sora*!" he snapped as the cards trapping Riku and the others dissolved into dark mist—and so did Luxord himself.

Why do they keep calling me Roxas...? Sora mentally complained.

"You okay?" said Kairi, a bit anxious for him.

"Yeah! No worries." Sora gave her a grin. "C'mon, let's keep moving."

Donald and Goofy exchanged a look. "Gawrsh, Sora's kinda... showin' off, don't ya think?" Goofy remarked.

Arms crossed, Donald nodded. "Yeah. For Riku and Kairi."

"Hey!" Sora twisted his body around. "I can *hear* you guys!"

As Donald and Goofy jumped, Riku and Kairi shared a look and chuckled.

They fought their way through a never-ending torrent of Heartless.

"Should we really destroy all these Heartless...?" Goofy said with a sigh.

"If we don't, they'll cut us down." Riku slashed through the ones in front of him with Soul Eater, forging ahead. "We've got to keep going."

They reached a passageway where the great heart-shaped moon shone down on them.

They couldn't help but stare up at Kingdom Hearts.

"Just believe in yourself. Don't give up."

When Kairi's encouraging murmur reached Sora's ears, he realized something and asked her, "Say, Kairi... Where'd you get that Keyblade?"

"Huh...?" She looked down at the weapon in her hand, then up at Riku.

But Riku gave a tiny shake of his head as if he didn't quite know, either.

"So now Kairi and the king have Keyblades, too, not just Sora," said Goofy.

"What, we aren't cool enough?" Donald edged closer to Kairi, squinting at her key.

Goofy smiled helplessly.

"What *is* the Keyblade, though, really?" Sora wondered.

"A key, wielded by a chosen one... Nothing more."

With that, Saïx appeared.

Kairi was the first to ready her Keyblade. "It's *you*...!" she said with audible resentment.

Sora glanced at her before fixing his attention on Saïx and readying himself for combat. “You—you’re the one who kidnapped Kairi!”

“Hmph. Well, only you could have made it this far in one piece, Roxas.”

“You know, that’s getting really old!”

As Sora nearly lost his cool, Donald and Goofy jumped out in front of him, defending their friend. “Yeah! This is Sora!” Donald aimed his wand at Saïx.

“Different name, same fate.” Saïx gripped the enormous Claymore and swung it faster than their eyes could follow. It whipped up a stinging gale that tore through the hall, past the trio to assail the other two.

“Kairi!” Riku wrapped her in an embrace to shield her from the wind—which was fierce enough to hurl them back out of the passage.

“Sora?!” Kairi called.

“Leave it to us!” Sora replied. He rushed at Saïx with Donald and Goofy right behind him. “You’re gonna pay for what you did to Kairi!”

His Keyblade clashed against the Claymore.

“*Thundaga!*” Donald’s spell struck from above.

Saïx swiftly knocked aside the Keyblade and blocked the lightning spell. “So...you are not just Roxas.”

He spread his arms as if to gather up the light from Kingdom Hearts. His long blue hair stood on end, and a dull glow surrounded him.

“Now what?!” Sora cried.

The Claymore gleamed in the moonlight as Saïx struck at him—and with far more power than before.

“*Ngh...*!” Sora winced.

“Hold on, Sora!” Goofy slammed himself into Saïx’s back.

Slowly, Saïx turned around. “All shall be lost to you!” he roared, whirling the Claymore to hurl Goofy away, and then charged Donald before he could finish his spell.

“*Wak!*”

“Goofy! Donald!” Sora ran to the mage collapsed on the floor, and gave him a potion before helping him up.

Meanwhile, Goofy was already back on his feet to confront Saïx again.

“C’mon, Donald!” Sora rushed Saïx again, knocking him into the air with an upward sweep, and then Goofy rammed him.

Saïx soared higher still and regained his balance in midair—but Donald hit him squarely in the chest with a powerful “*Firaga!*”

It blasted Saïx into the wall. Motionless, he dropped to the floor.

“Got ’im!” Sora and Donald hugged, but Saïx dragged himself

upright and raised his eyes to the sky.

"No... Kingdom Hearts..." He opened his arms, bathed in the moonlight. "Where is my heart...?"

He dissolved into dark mist and faded from existence.

"Nothing less from the Keyblade wielder and the king's finest," Riku said after watching the battle, stepping cautiously toward them. Behind him, Kairi nodded.

Gazing at Riku, Sora asked the question that had been on his mind for a while now. "So...why are they all calling me Roxas?"

Riku blinked and rolled his eyes up toward the heart-shaped moon.

"You know why, Riku, don't you?" Sora pressed.

"Because, Sora..." Reluctantly, he brought his gaze back down to meet Sora's. "Roxas is your Nobody."

"My...Nobody?" Sora sank into thought.

Goofy folded his arms, too. "Isn't a Nobody what's left behind when someone loses their heart and turns into a Heartless?"

"But, Sora, you've never— *Wak?*" Donald interrupted himself, cocking his head.

"It was when you came to rescue me," said Kairi, trying to give them a hint. "Remember?"

When Sora had plunged the Keyblade into his own breast to free Kairi's heart from inside him...he had become a Heartless himself.

"That's how Roxas came into being," Riku explained. "Xemnas was the one who found him. He could use the Keyblade because he was your Nobody. So Xemnas took him into Organization XIII—but he betrayed them. And then I fought him because I thought it would help you wake up."

He closed his eyes as if a memory was coming back to him and shook his head.

"Riku?" Sora peered at him uncertainly.

"The first time, I lost. The second time, I made sure I was stronger."

"You...lost to him?"

At that, Riku opened his eyes and nodded. "Maybe I didn't need to fight him after all. I think he left the organization because..." He looked squarely at Sora. "...Because he really wanted to meet you."

"Roxas..." Sora's gaze fell. "I wish I could meet him, too."

My own Nobody... Another me. Roxas.

As he fell into thought, Riku stepped closer and placed a hand over Sora's heart. "Roxas..."

"Huh?" Sora covered Riku's hand with his own. *Here... He means Roxas is here?*

A joyful, warm smile spread on Sora's face. He let go of Riku's

hand and looked toward the other end of the passageway.

Watching them, Kairi rested a hand on her own heart.

“All right. Let’s go,” said Riku.

The others nodded in reply.

At the entrance to the passage, Naminé never took her eyes off the scene, somewhat protectively.

Roxas... You returned, didn't you?

She placed her hand to her chest like Kairi had done. Was there a heart? She could feel the beating of her physical heart. *We Nobodies are alive.*

But like this place itself, it was an in-between existence, barely definable.

I have to go back soon, too...

To where I can hear a warmer heartbeat.

On the high balcony with a view of Kingdom Hearts, Ansem the Wise closely monitored the device as it worked. The ray linking it to the great moon twisted and trembled. He chuckled.

“Ansem...?” King Mickey said tentatively.

“Ah, my friend... So many years I’ve spent studying the workings of the heart, and yet in the end, it seems I haven’t learned a thing.” He shook his head, gazing up at Kingdom Hearts.

“What d’ya mean?”

“The process of encoding hearts into data can’t be predicted with calculations,” said Ansem. “The inhabitants of my simulated Twilight Town were data created from the hearts of real people. I was convinced that they would think and behave the way I’d envisioned—but I couldn’t have been more wrong. A heart is...so much more than any system could be.”

The king folded his arms. He didn’t quite understand what the other Twilight Town was... But why would Hayner and his friends in the real Twilight Town have been so concerned with Sora? It was probably because of Roxas’s presence in the alternate Twilight Town.

“I saw it when Roxas and Kairi crossed paths,” Ansem went on. “I knew... But I was too stubborn to accept it. I’ve always done that. I try to wrap my mind around what my heart already knows—and it goes awry.”

The device, cradled in his arms, began humming ominously.

“While I was trying to bring Sora back, I had so many plans in place. But once Sora was an acting force, they fell apart. All my research, all my designs amounted to nothing in the face of that one boy’s heart.”

The droning from the device grew. Now it was vibrating.

“Ansem—the machine!” King Mickey worried.

“All the more proof that hearts cannot be contained by something so restrictive as data.” Finally looking away from Kingdom Hearts, Ansem focused on his friend. “Run now! This contraption may very well explode, and there’s no telling what might happen then!”

“But—” Conflicted, the king lowered his eyes.

And then they were no longer alone. “Your Majesty!”

It was Sora and the gang, bounding up the steps to the balcony.

“Sora...” Ansem turned to them. “The rest is up to you. And, Roxas—if by some chance you can hear me...I’m sorry.”

If Sora could hear, maybe the one inside him could, too. He reached up to his heart, clenching his fist there.

“Ansem!” King Mickey ran toward him.

“My heart is telling me what I must do,” said Ansem. “Please... allow me to listen.”

“No—!” The king couldn’t bring himself to leave Ansem’s side.

Riku put a hand on King Mickey’s shoulder, shaking his head.

“But Riku...! We can’t just—”

He shook his head again, gently. “He’s going to follow his heart. No one can change that.”

Just then, the air trembled at one corner of the balcony, and everyone but Ansem turned.

“I was wondering who would dare interfere with my Kingdom Hearts.” Xemnas stepped out of a dark portal. “And look—here you all are.”

“Xemnas...!” Sora stood ready with the Keyblade.

“And even you, Ansem the Wise. You look pathetic.”

Ansem refused to look at Xemnas as he spoke. “Have your laugh. I deserve as much for failing to see what a fool my apprentice was.”

He shook his head in regret.

“Students do take after their teachers. Any apprentice of yours *would* be a fool,” Xemnas sneered, then raised his eyes to the light of Kingdom Hearts. “After all, none of this would have happened without you. It was you who brought the Heartless into being. Your research inspired me to go further than you ever dared.”

You saved me when I wandered without memories—or rather, saved Xehanort, Xemnas added to himself.

If you hadn’t found me that day and helped me... If you hadn’t been studying the mysteries of the heart... Things would never have come to this.

Does that mean it was all inevitable? Or is someone’s will at work?

A will greater than ours...?

“I admit, my recklessness brought chaos to more worlds than one. But what is it *you* were seeking?” Ansem demanded. He was asking the shell of his former apprentice, though he might ask the same

question of himself. “You erased me from this world only to take my name and continue research better left forgotten... And is this the answer you’ve been after?”

“Indeed. I am carrying on what you began, creating a new world brick by brick—heart by heart.”

But even as Xemnas said it, he wondered. *Really? Is it really what I sought?*

The inexorable pull of Kingdom Hearts, so strong that even he no longer understood what he’d first been seeking, and the longing for the heart he had lost... But what *was* a heart?

What I lost when I became a Nobody...I don’t even know what it is.

He concentrated his frustration back on Ansem. “Once I thought I’d earn your praise. But all you’ve ever done is hold me back. I understand—unlike me, you have a heart. And you are powerless to control it. Consumed by your jealousy of the student who surpassed his teacher.”

Ansem sadly shook his head.

That young scientist who had once shown so much promise in the town of Radiant Garden—where had he gone? Was this what it meant to lose one’s heart?

Or...had he never had one to begin with?

“Xehanort... The foolish apprentice of a foolish man,” Ansem said heavily, at last facing Xemnas properly. “You have surpassed nothing—only proven that neither of us ever learned anything. We may profess to know the heart, but its essence is beyond our grasp. We are both ignorant, as oblivious as when we began. Any world you try to create would be the same—an empire born of ignorance! You and your creation are destined to fail!”

Sparks were flying from the device he held. He forced himself to stop ranting.

“I’ve said enough. Riku—you know what to do!”

Riku nodded firmly.

“King Mickey, my friend... Forgive me!”

Anguished, the king shook his head.

“Farewell!” Ansem said, just as a blinding light flared from the device.

And in the same moment, Riku darted out to shield King Mickey, Sora, and the other three.

The device fired its last at the great moon. Tumbling down from Kingdom Hearts and spilling from the machine were hearts, countless glowing souls.

Sora had seen a rain of light like this once before...

Back then, those radiant shards had belonged to the worlds... But now, they belonged to hearts.

Deep in the castle and all over the world, the Nobodies looked up to the sky. The hearts they sought showered down upon them.

And then...new Heartless were born, too.

The brilliant light pervaded everything, and they knew no more...

The light is what we lost... Our hearts and so many other precious things.

Wake up, Sora.

Hey, Riku... Wake up.

The things you lost have come back, right?

Naminé clasped her hands together beneath the shower of light.

He thought he heard someone calling his name. Sora came to, eventually pushing himself up. The first thing his eyes focused on was Riku—collapsed on the floor.

“Riku...!” Sora scrambled over to him and knelt down, peering into his face.

It belonged to a silver-haired boy.

Not the Ansem-impersonating Xehanort, not anymore. It was the real Riku.

Donald and Goofy got up and saw what had happened.

“Wow!”

“Hooray, you’re back!”

And then Kairi was awake, too. “Riku!”

As he slowly got to his feet, they noticed the black sash covering his eyes. He shook his head, then cautiously touched his face.

“No tellin’ what might happen, huh...?” King Mickey murmured to himself as he stood, repeating Ansem’s words.

And then they noticed that neither Ansem nor Xemnas was anywhere to be seen.

“Riku!” Sora flung his arms around the other boy, looking up into his face. Far up. *I know we haven’t seen each other for a year—but Riku’s so much taller! No fair!*

“Are you gonna take that off?” said Sora, tugging at the black cloth over Riku’s eyes.

Riku slowly untied it and blinked against the light.

Sora let him go and asked, “What’s that for?” Riku lowered his head.

“His eyes couldn’t lie,” said the king, stepping toward them.

“Lie?” Sora pouted at Riku. “Just who were you trying to lie to, huh?”

Riku’s expression didn’t change as he looked up again. “Myself.”

That word from him had a terrible certainty to it. Sora’s brows

drew together and he moved closer to his friend again, staring into the face he'd missed so much.

"Seriously, Riku...!" Sora grabbed his collar. "Why were you trying to do so much on your own? You've got friends—you have us!"

Donald and Goofy nodded, then King Mickey, and finally Kairi.

Seeing all his friends smiling at him, Riku exhaled and leaned over, bringing his face close to Sora's. "What, did you forget? The thing is, Sora... I'm not a huge sap like you."

"Hey!" Sora scowled. "That's harsh!"

Just as the others burst into laughter, an unsettling sound emanated from the diminishing Kingdom Hearts in the sky—a rumble that shook through the world.

Donald ran to the balcony. "Uh-oh!"

The hearts that should have been scattering through the worlds were now trying to assemble back into Kingdom Hearts. And huge swarms of Heartless were crawling up and up in an attempt to chase them.

"What should we do, Riku?" Sora looked at his friend.

"We have to defeat Xemnas. He's the last surviving member of Organization XIII."

With that, Riku threw off his black cloak. In his hand was his own Keyblade—the Way to the Dawn.

"Yeah...", Sora agreed, seeing that the other boy was already leaving. He was only too happy to follow. "Riku!"

The hordes of Heartless set upon them in far greater numbers than before. They couldn't afford to stall, instead dashing on to the highest point of the castle.

"How are there so many...?" Riku muttered.

Sora grinned at him. "We can beat 'em together!"

Right. We'll be okay together.

Whatever's waiting for us, we can get through it now that Riku's back.

"Sora! Riku!" Kairi called, pointing up to an inky blotch on a wall. More and more Heartless were pouring out of the roiling blackness.

"Time to show 'em what we're made of!" Sora hurled himself right into the swarm—or was about to, when two figures arrived to block his path.

"Be gone from here!" the tall, shadowy one cried in her cold, imperious voice. "Leave these creatures to us!"

"But there's no way we can take 'em all!" another voice protested—one that King Mickey and the others from Disney Castle couldn't have forgotten if they wanted to.

Somehow, Maleficent and Pete were here.

“I will be sending them after Xemnas,” Maleficent told him. “Unless you would rather fight them yourself?”

Pete seemed to consider for an instant before twitching in alarm. He looked at her helplessly. “Uh, I think there’s one more option... Run!”

Maleficent turned her back on him and raised her staff. “Off with you, then!”

Pete edged backward, right into King Mickey. Recognizing the king, he pulled himself together enough for a disdainful smirk. “... Well, if it ain’t the boat-boy king.”

“I think you’d better weigh anchor, Captain Pete!” said the king.

Pete squinted in confusion.

Right, he used to call me captain. Back when this little guy was always scurrying around, giving me a headache with his mischief. Back then... I used to be great back then...!

“What, me putter away?! I don’t think so!” Pete ran back to Maleficent, who stood facing down the Heartless.

“Sora! And you, little king!” With a swish of her cape, Maleficent brandished her staff at the Heartless. “Remember this—when you are finished here, this castle shall be mine!”

“Heh. I don’t get too many chances to show up the king! Bring ’em on!” Pete charged into the swarms.

“We’d better hurry,” King Mickey prompted Sora, who was watching Maleficent and Pete.

“But...!” He had his Keyblade ready, prepared to follow them into the fray.

“They’re doing what their hearts command. We can’t interfere.”



With a grim determination, the king stepped onto the pathway leading to the top of the castle.

As Sora tried to keep up, he couldn't help anxiously glancing back at Maleficent and Pete in their battle. Finally, summoning his own determination, he brought his gaze forward, following the king.



ANTHEM FOR XEMNAS

CHAPTER 6

ANTHEM FOR XEMNAS

AS THE HEART COMMANDS.

I act as my heart commands. And as yours commands.

Even though I...I am a Nobody. I have no heart.

Then what is it that drives me? I don't know.

But even so...there is something in me, something like a heart, for me to follow.

It doesn't matter that I lack a heart.

My memories with all of you...and your hearts that touched my emptiness...

That touch is what guides me.

Isn't that right, Axel?

Step by step, Sora climbed up the stairway to the heights of the castle. He had Riku beside him. Right behind them were Kairi and King Mickey, followed by the friends who had traveled with him all this time, Donald and Goofy.

There's no way we can lose. And we're not going to. Because everyone's here together. My friends are here with me.

The light was gone. Kingdom Hearts awaited them, tainted with darkness, eerie indigo and black.

On the highest level, a strange open space like an altar, Xemnas was there gazing up at the tainted moon. "Ah, my Kingdom Hearts...ruined. I'll have to start all over again..." he murmured to no one, but then he turned to them. "Warriors of the Keyblade! Go forth and bring me more hearts!"

It was more of an entreaty than an order. Either way, Sora, Riku, and King Mickey all raised their Keyblades at once and refused. "No!"

Xemnas regarded the Keyblades pointed at him and shrugged. "Denizens of light... Why do you hate the darkness?"

"We don't hate it," said the king. "It's just that darkness...is kinda scary. But it's part of everything. All the worlds are made of light *and* darkness—you can't have one without the other. Sorta makes you

wonder why we are scared of it..."

As if the question had just occurred to him, he looked down in thought.

It's not that we hate the darkness for existing... There's good in it, too. Like the peace of nightfall gently puts us to sleep. And all the stars in the night sky—they need the dark to sparkle and shine.

But still, the darkness can be so frightening.

"It's because of what lurks inside it," Riku replied.

Riku knew better than anyone the terror of the dark—and the pain of those corrupted by it.

Terrible things lurk there in the darkness. Evil things. Things to lure you in with kind whispers and draw you astray.

And then, before you know it, darkness is stealing sweetly into your heart.

That's why we fear it.

And light cuts through the darkness. Light destroys it. Well—no. Darkness is never destroyed.

It remains just at the other side of light, quietly, and it's there to make the light brighter.

Light shines even more powerfully because there is darkness in the world...while the things that lurk in the dark fear the light, and they'll hide from it.

Darkness didn't come first. Light came first.

I think the darkness came into being because of the light. That's the feeling I get when I look at Sora.

"Then allow me another question," said Xemnas. "You accept darkness, yet you choose to live in the light. Why is it that you so despise those of us whose very being is rejected by both—those of us given no choice, destined only to fade into nothing?"

"That's simple," Riku said flatly. "It's because you mess up our worlds."

Light, darkness, Nobodies—none of that matters. We just can't look the other way when someone is wreaking havoc and hurting the people we care about.

"And? What other choice do you suppose we had?" There was a hint of sadness in Xemnas's words.

At that, Sora lost his patience. "You're not fooling anybody, Xemnas! You don't feel sad about anything! All you do is throw around the power of darkness and use it to hurt people!"

Xemnas let out a cruel laugh. "Ah, nothing gets by you. It's true—I cannot feel sorrow. No matter what misery befalls the worlds, no matter what you think or whether you live..."

Then he lifted his hands toward Kingdom Hearts again. Sparks of light—perhaps the scattering hearts—rose into the sky.

Sora squeezed his eyes shut against the surge of brilliance, and...

He was standing in front of a massive skyscraper. And he couldn't find the others. "Hey—guys?"

There was only Xemnas standing in front of him.

"What did you do with my friends?!" Sora demanded.

"You'd do better to worry about yourself, hero of the light!" Xemnas rushed him.

Sora brought up the Keyblade to block the incoming blow and countered, knocking him away, then swung again.

But in the instant he was out of range, Xemnas vanished.

"Where are you?!"

Sora could feel Xemnas's presence from high above—atop the skyscraper.

He took an enormous leap and hit the side of the building running. As he sped upward, a red glow caught his eye—twin swords, the Ethereal Blades, in Xemnas's hands as their owner hurtled down at him in an attack aided by gravity.

Huh? Did I fight someone before like this...?

The strike as Xemnas swished past him drove the brief flash of déjà vu from his mind.

Sora reached the ground again close behind Xemnas, who leaped back to take stock of the situation.

"This is it for you!" Sora charged straight at him.

Xemnas sent his blades spinning around Sora, and the boy didn't escape unscathed.

He didn't feel all that confident, fighting alone... But he'd be okay. He knew everyone was with him.

They're with me in my heart.

Sora lifted the Keyblade. There was a terrific *clang!* and Xemnas stepped back.

He was smiling faintly—and he was disappearing.

Just then, Kairi's voice rang out. "Sora! Where are you?"

The looming skyscraper dissolved into light. Once again, Sora squeezed his eyes shut in the glare.

"Sora? Answer me!" Riku called.

Sora had vanished along with Xemnas, and neither of them was anywhere to be found.

Where could Xemnas have taken him...? Dread sat heavy in his chest, choking him, but Riku kept calling out.

Just when we finally found each other, and I was able to turn back

into my real self... Sora, you can't leave me now...

As Riku started sinking into despair, Sora materialized in the middle of the party, sprawled on the ground as if he'd fallen from somewhere.

"Sora!"

They all clustered around him. Shaking his head, he got up on his own. "Where's Xemnas?"

No one could reply.

He'd probably beaten him...although they couldn't be sure.

"*Wak!*" Donald shouted in alarm, pointing up to Kingdom Hearts and its dark-stained light.

And to Xemnas floating in the center of it.

"Hear me, Kingdom Hearts... We must begin anew. Ah, but I will give to you as many hearts as it takes. Mark my words! You can no more be complete without me than I without you!"

The light swirled around him in a terrible dance.

"Oh, Kingdom Hearts, heed me! Lend me your power so that we may be complete... Power to eliminate the fools that stand in our way," he said, as if pleading with someone dear to him. Kingdom Hearts shone brighter.

"Xemnas, no!" King Mickey cried.

"Hearts burning with rage, hearts racked with envy, hearts quavering with sorrow..." Xemnas intoned. "That old fool Ansem said the heart is beyond understanding. But it is not beyond mine! The heart is the source of all power!"

Kingdom Hearts radiated more brilliantly still...and the light blazed forth. Sora and the others shielded their eyes—and when they could look again, Xemnas was gone.

"You can't hide from us, Xemnas!" Sora shouted up at Kingdom Hearts.

"We can't let him get away now!" said King Mickey. Sora and Riku knew he was right.

"Look at that!" Kairi pointed to a burst of brightness gathering below the great moon. It coalesced into an imposing door.

Goofy squinted at it. "Gawrsh, what's that?"

"...Kingdom Hearts..." murmured the king, gazing up at the door—which looked rather familiar.

In fact, it was very similar to the door to the realm of darkness that Sora and Riku had helped him close.

"Let's go." Riku grimly followed the king's gaze. "Xemnas must be inside."

"The worlds gave us this doorway," King Mickey added. "They're entrusting their fate to us."

"Right." Sora nodded.

Riku turned to him. "Once we go through, there's no going back. It's victory...or oblivion. Well, Sora?"

Of course, Riku had to know the answer he'd receive.

"Let's go!" Sora replied with a nod.

King Mickey and Riku were with him.

The three stepped toward the door, and each held his Keyblade high. Three beams of light erupted, and the door opened.

"Get ready, Xemnas. It's over for you!" said Sora. They crossed through the door.

Please... Please protect them. And the worlds.

Wait. I want to ask the will of the worlds—

What is it you want us to do?

Why did you create us, the lost ones, the Nobodies?

Naminé was filled with questions as she watched over Sora and his friends.

Beyond the door, the group found a bizarre, twisted world of glowing nonsensical buildings. It felt like that first skyscraper.

It was the center of this world, and Xemnas stood atop its bright core.

"So... Your hearts have led you to obliteration. Perhaps it's unwise to be too loyal to one's heart... I'll have to remember that lesson."

Xemnas raised his hands, and the buildings began to shake and crumble. Heaps of debris crashed down in front of Kairi and King Mickey— inches from their noses.

"Kairi!" Sora called out.

"We're okay!" the king shouted back. "You two, keep going. I'll take care of Kairi!"

"All right... We can do this." Sora readied his Keyblade, and Riku did the same beside him, Way to the Dawn in his hand. Donald and Goofy had their wand and shield out. They had to run—the buildings kept collapsing, and even the ground was crumbling beneath their feet.

"C'mon!" Sora dashed ahead, jumping atop a falling facade and springing higher. The other three followed his lead.

"Yipe!" Goofy nearly fell from an unsteady foothold. Riku reached out to grab his hand just in time.

"Keep going, Goofy!" Donald glanced back to yell at him, but then he lost his footing on the slope, too—and slid right into Riku, who snatched him up.

Riku laughed under his breath. “For guys who tag along with a hero, you two sure are a handful.”

“Wak! Put me down!”

“We gotta hurry!” Sora called back to them, reaching solid ground at last.

“Quack!” Donald finally caught up, then Goofy, both making a spectacular landing right on top of Sora.

“Why do you guys always *do* that?!” Sora complained from beneath the heap.

Riku smartly touched down beside them. “Seriously... How did you three manage to survive this long?”

He stretched his shoulders and then charged toward the huge bright core ahead of them. Without giving Donald a chance to make the retort he was clearly devising, Riku smashed the core with a single blow.

“Whoa!” Donald jumped, impressed enough to forget his gibe.

“Nice work, Riku!” Sora dashed up beside him, and before their eyes the core opened.

Inside sat Xemnas, now outfitted entirely in gleaming armor.

“You fools!” he cried, and myriad spears ranged themselves around Sora and Riku—no, lances. They were the same as Xaldin’s weapons.

“Here goes, Sora!” Riku wasted no time rushing at Xemnas, and Sora was right beside him.

And then something strange happened...

“Huh...?”

What’s...happening to me...?

Falling...falling...into darkness...

“Sora!” Goofy called. Sora’s form was engulfed in a black substance. He hardly looked like himself anymore—more like a Nobody.

Sora dropped on all fours and pounced on Xemnas at an incredible speed, attacking ferociously.

“What’s going on?!” Donald cried, anxiously clutching his wand.

“Sora!” Riku called to the pitch-black thing shaped like his friend—the anti-Sora. Hearing his voice, it paused and turned back into Sora, the darkness washing away like a wave receding from the shore.

“What...was that...?” Sora stared at his hands.

But in the moment of his distraction, a water double of Demyx ran straight for him.

“Look out!” At the last possible instant, Goofy knocked aside the Demyx double.

Riku charged at Xemnas and slashed out hard with Way to the Dawn. “Did we do it?!”

Xemnas stopped moving and fixed a malicious glare on Sora. “... So this is the strength of your hearts?”

“Sora! Get him!” called Riku.

Sora jumped as if suddenly remembering where he was and then brought the Keyblade down. The terrible roar from Xemnas seemed to shake the world’s foundations.

A flash of light...a torrent of wind, a shock wave.

Bit by bit, the armor dissipated, and Xemnas returned to his usual form.

“Sora!” King Mickey and Kairi caught up.

As Sora held the Keyblade ready, Xemnas stumbled on his feet.

“I need...more rage,” he growled as he looked up at them. “I need more...hearts...”

“Xemnas... There’s more to a heart than just anger or hate. It’s full of all kinds of feelings,” said Sora, trying one last time to persuade him. “Don’t you remember?”

Slowly, quietly, he turned to Sora. “No...I don’t.”

Darkness seeped into the air around Xemnas, blotting him out. For some strange reason, he was smiling as he disappeared.

And then he was gone, melted away into the dark.

“We did it!” Sora hopped up in triumph. Donald and Goofy grinned at him.

“Gosh, you fellas did great!” said the king.

But Riku began to distance himself as everyone celebrated.

“...Riku?” Sora turned to him uncertainly, then approached him.

There was sadness in the set of Riku’s shoulders... It made Sora worry. “You’re coming back with us, right?”

“I’m corrupted,” Riku said without even hesitating. “I gave in to the darkness.”

He couldn’t help but feel it was wrong for him to return to their pristine islands. How could he show his face to everyone when he’d helped destroy their precious home?

The Destiny Islands. He’d seen it in dreams so many times, and yet he had a hard time believing that it would truly be right for him to be in that picture—the three of them on their island again, laughing together.

“Riku...!” Sora shouted after him, objecting to all the doubts in his head.

Maybe Riku doesn’t want to go home, Sora thought. But I don’t want to go home without him.

We promised Kairi.

I want to run down the beach together again. There are so many things

I wanted to do with him.

Riku glanced back dolefully. "How can I face everyone there...?"

Sora squished his cheeks with his hands, making the silliest scrunched-up face he could manage. "Like *diish!*"

Riku burst out laughing. Having achieved the goal of cheering him up, Sora gave him a smug grin.

Actually, Sora lost his sword fights against Riku all the time, but he'd never lost a staring contest.

Just as Sora was about to plainly tell Riku to come home with them—a rumble shook the world.

"C'mon, hurry!" King Mickey ran to the two of them.

"I'll open a path." Riku held up his hand to call up a dark portal... but nothing happened.

What had changed that he could no longer open the way to the Corridors of Darkness? He stared at his hand in confusion.

"You don't belong in the realm of darkness anymore, Riku," said the king.

He only kept looking down at himself. *If I don't...belong in the darkness anymore...then I can't use its power.*

"Your Majesty! How are we gonna get back?" Donald cut in desperately.

Then, feeling someone else's eyes on them, Sora and Kairi turned back.

It was a flaxen-haired girl—Naminé.

But she was transparent, as if she wasn't really there, or maybe halfway to vanishing.

Silently, she lifted her hand, palm out, and opened a dark rift.

"Huh? Who opened that?" Donald wondered, and as he stepped toward the rift, he passed *through* Naminé.

King Mickey did the same, looking up at the rift. They apparently couldn't see her at all. "Dunno who it was... But we'd better hurry and get in."

Just as he said that, Pluto arrived from somewhere, running right up to him. "Oh, hey!"

"*Wak!*" Donald started.

Pluto ran in excited circles around Donald and the king, then jumped into the rift ahead of everyone else.

"Wait for me!" Goofy scrambled after him, and then King Mickey followed, too.

"C'mon!" Donald glanced back at Sora before leaping in.

Naminé watched them go and faced Sora and Kairi with a warm smile.

Kairi moved closer to her. "Thank you, Naminé."

"Sure." She nodded, then gazed at Sora—*into* him. "See? We meet

again, like we promised.”

Sora could only respond, “Huh?”

Naminé’s smile deepened. *We don’t cease to be...we just go back.*

“You said we’d meet again, but when we did, we might not recognize each other.”

Sora heard the voice from somewhere. Mystified, he looked around—and then Roxas stepped forward, separating himself from Sora. Like Naminé, he was translucent, not entirely there.

“I did say that, didn’t I?” said Naminé.

I remember. Those things I frantically told Roxas when we were running out of time.

The promise we made.

I haven’t forgotten. I never will.

We’ll meet again. And then we can talk about everything. I may not know it’s you, and you may not know it’s me—but we will meet again. I promise—I know we will.

And even though we didn’t recognize each other right away, here we are—meeting again.

Can I take that as the proof that I exist, even though I’m a Nobody?

We do exist in the fragments of others’ memories.

Roxas smiled softly. “But I did know you.”

“Mm-hmm... It’s strange.” Naminé returned the smile.

“I think I understand, though... I can see myself the way you remember me. And you see yourself the way I remember you.”

She nodded. *The shards of what stays with us, those fragments of memory—they won’t disappear.*

Even if the chains linking them together are broken, the memories don’t die.

I knew that I had the power to line them back up, the pieces of memories scattered in the depths of the heart, so how... How could I have forgotten something so important?

I understood that. I just couldn’t remember.

It’s because I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t want to discover the secrets of the heart. I didn’t want...to unravel the mysteries of what a Nobody is.

“I always thought...that Nobodies were doomed to fade back into darkness,” Naminé murmured as her gaze dropped.

“But you and I didn’t,” said Roxas. “We got to meet our original selves. Maybe that’s why.”

Then she looked up and nodded brightly. “So, we can be together

again.”

“Right. Anytime Sora and Kairi are together.” Roxas stood close to Naminé as if he wanted to cling to her for an instant.

We won't disappear. And we'll be able to meet again.

But...the Nobodies who did disappear—no. We'll be able to see Axel again, won't we?

I want to believe that Axel returned somewhere. I won't give up that hope. Just like Sora and Kairi never gave up.

“And we'll be together every day, right, Sora?!” said Kairi, peering at him intently.

“Um—yeah!” Still not entirely following, Sora nodded anyway.

But he didn't have to understand. As long as Sora was there, everyone would be happy. Naminé watched him with a smile.

Kairi reached out to her.

Without another word, Naminé took Kairi's hand in hers.

She glowed, dissolving into light that went into Kairi.

“What—?!” Sora burst out, startled, and stared with his mouth open.

Roxas approached him. “*Shh*. Look sharp.”

Startled again by his voice, Sora jumped and faced Roxas.

I've wanted to meet you for so long, Sora.

I tried to leave the organization to meet you. And I wasn't wrong.

Roxas closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sky.

Will I see Axel again?

Then, like Naminé, Roxas was cloaked in light as he faded away and flowed into Sora.

“Huh...?!” Sora examined himself as if trying to figure out where the light had gone.

Having watched the whole scene, Riku took a few steps closer. “Don't worry. It's all still you.”

Those words didn't quite soothe his doubts. Sora stared at his hands.

“Guys, let's go home!” Kairi called to them from in front of the dark rift.

“Riku... C'mon.” Sora looked up at him.

Riku nodded—but then the dark rift began to close on Kairi, blotting her out.

“Sora... Riku!” she cried.

They ran to her as the portal closed in front of their faces.

“Kairi!”

Not a trace remained in the empty air.

“Oh no... Riku, what do we do?!” Sora quickly turned to him in a panic, but a flash of brilliance blinded them.

“Sora—look!” Gripping Way to the Dawn, Riku pointed to the

darkness beyond, and in the distance, they could see something—a Nobody shaped like an enormous silver dragon—heading straight for them.

“Here it comes!”

The dragon Nobody hurled itself against the structure they stood on.

“Riku...!” Sora looked back at him again, and—

Is that...Xemnas? He didn't disappear?

The dragon's tail lashed, and the floor beneath them tilted.

“Whoa!”

Before they could slide off and fall, Riku broke into a sprint and took a flying leap.

“Riku?!”

He landed on a strange aircraft close by, a little glider. “Sora!” he called. The glider had a sidecar—Sora caught on and leaped for it.

The glider sailed easily through the air, pursuing the dragon.

“Nice, Riku!” Sora shouted over the wind.

“Be quiet and hold on tight!” Riku warned him and accelerated faster.

From up ahead, the dragon fired bullets of light at them. Riku tilted and dove to avoid the shots and catch up to the dragon's tail, close enough for Sora to take a swipe with his Keyblade.

The dragon lowered its tail, rising higher, and this time shot laser beams. “Get down!” said Riku, and Sora sank into a crouch. Dodging the lasers, Riku made a sharp turn, but one shot grazed the glider.

“Uh-oh!” Sora covered his head as some pieces of the hull came off. The dragon passed above them.

“Are you okay?” asked Riku.

“Yeah! Actually, this is kinda fun!” Sora grinned as he got up again and readied the Keyblade. Of course, he knew this was a battle for the fate of the worlds, but fighting something big and ferocious with Riku beside him—it brightened his spirits. And knowing that Riku felt the same way made him especially glad.

“Of course you're enjoying this,” Riku remarked.

“Riku—look out ahead!”

The dragon had crossed into their path again. Riku fired the glider's own lasers into its belly. “You're up, Sora!”

At the cue, Sora sprang up atop the dragon and managed to deal it a blow. “Riku!”

As he jumped back off, Riku was waiting with the glider, as if he already knew exactly where Sora would go.

“This thing is tough,” Sora complained.

“Well, it is our last enemy, right?” Riku's lips curled in a confident smirk and he steered toward the dragon's head. “I'll hit it with lasers.

And then you—”

“Jump on it and attack its head, right?” Sora grinned at him. “Gotcha!”

Riku fired the lasers, making the dragon flinch. As it lowered its massive head, Sora leaped on and smashed his Keyblade into it. The dragon began losing altitude.

“We got ‘im!” Sora jumped back to the glider and threw his arms around Riku’s neck.

“Ack!” The momentum from Sora’s hug knocked Riku into the control stick, and the glider spun around.

“Oops. Sorry!”

Directly below them, the huge dragon Nobody was tumbling into darkness. The black storm swallowed up the dragon and then came for Sora and Riku, a misty wind swirling around them.

And standing in the center of it—in the eye of the storm—was Xemnas.

“Let’s go!” said Sora. Riku nodded and steered the glider in through the buffeting gale.

On reaching the eye of the storm, they disembarked from the glider. Xemnas greeted them with a cold smile.

His black cloak was now white with swirling, jagged black patterns—he seemed vastly different from before.

“Heroes of the realm of light... It will not end this way. Not yet. If light and darkness are both eternal, then surely we beings of nothingness must be the same—eternal.”

Riku met Xemnas’s portentous declaration with a stony stare. “You’re right. Darkness and light are eternal,” he replied, his voice low. “Nothing probably goes on forever, too. But guess what, Xemnas...?”

“That doesn’t mean *you’re* eternal!” Sora finished for him in a shout and took his stance with the Keyblade.

Xemnas let out a deep, unsettling chuckle. “Perhaps no more eternal than the radiance you two bear...”

We may not be eternal, Sora thought, *but we’re not going to let you win!*

So the final battle was upon them.



SOMETHING YOU COULD NEVER IMITATE

CHAPTER 7

SOMETHING YOU COULD NEVER IMITATE

“ANGER...AND HATE...REIGN SUPREME!”

Sora charged as Xemnas ranted, only to be immediately repelled by the Ethereal Blades. But in the instant of distraction he created, Riku darted in and landed a blow on Xemnas. Then bolts of energy, spiked like white thorny vines, hemmed Sora and Riku in, all but trapping them.

“Now what, Riku?” Sora gasped out, still recovering from the charge, as they stood back-to-back.

“Just fight however you want. I’ll cover you.”

“Oh, so you get to be the only one who looks cool!” Sora retorted, but Riku was already making another dash for Xemnas.

Before Riku’s eyes, Xemnas vanished—and then two of him appeared, as if he’d split and replicated himself.

Sora rushed the one who was farther away. Now he and Riku were both engaged one-on-one, embroiled in a bitter struggle.

“Can you...truly trust Riku?” Sora’s Xemnas asked.

It had never even occurred to Sora not to. “Why wouldn’t I?!” With a burst of strength, he threw Xemnas back.

The other Xemnas was trying a similar tactic. “Riku... Aren’t you jealous of Sora?”

Rather than bothering to respond, Riku simply slashed at Xemnas’s neck.

Xemnas seemed to laugh, slipping away as Riku tried to mow him down.

Sora and Riku came to a stop in nearly the same spot, both with grim expressions.

“What is controlling your hearts now?” the Xemnas twins said. “Sora, Riku—can you say for certain that there are no delusions lurking within your own hearts?”

“Shut up!” Sora retorted. *There’s more than just rage and hatred in people’s hearts. Why can’t Xemnas understand that...?*

The two figures of Xemnas let out a high, terrible laugh and fused back into one. “On your guard!”

Those bright thorny vines spat from his hands again. Sora dodged them and hurtled around behind him. “Take this!”

Sora’s attack sent Xemnas into the air. Riku was there to deal another blow, knocking him higher, but Xemnas regained his balance, brandishing the glowing red Ethereal Blades—or so they thought. This time, the red lights were projectiles raining down on them.

“Augh!” There was no avoiding them. Sora braced himself.

Riku moved swiftly to deflect the bullets. “C’mon, stay with it.”

“I *am*!”

Seeing the sweat on Riku’s forehead, Sora glared up at Xemnas, who was watching them from where he floated above. Swinging the Keyblade with all his might, he sprang toward him.

The strike connected, but Sora couldn’t quite right himself, and just before he could land, a burst of thorns caught him.

“Sora!” Riku ran to his aid, but the barbs ensnaring Sora drew him higher. As he struggled, the vines twined around his hands to restrain him.

“Fools...,” Xemnas murmured, and Riku rushed at him—but a wall of light blocked his path, and he couldn’t get close.

“Ri...ku...,” Sora groaned through clenched teeth.

“Sora!” Riku flung back Xemnas before he could get too close and jumped up to slash through Sora’s bonds.

But Xemnas slid in again, lifting his right hand to blast thorns at Riku from close range.

Riku pinned Xemnas’s hand under one arm and pushed him back with the other. And in almost the same moment, Sora, freed from the vines, plummeted to the ground.

“Real smooth, Sora.” Riku landed a second later and helped him up.

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Riku!” Sora gave him a sheepish grin and closed the distance to Xemnas, swinging the Keyblade with all his strength.



After absorbing the blow, Xemnas sailed through the air again.

But then—he blasted a flare of light upward, and when it faded, the world was cloaked in darkness.

“Look upon the strength of *my* hearts! Fury, hate, envy—power of all hearts, come to me, give me sustenance!”

Red lights rose out of the darkness, swirling around Sora and Riku.

“What...?” Sora muttered—just as the red lights blitzed toward them. “*Ngh—!*”

Riku batted the lights away, trying to protect himself and Sora, but there were too many for him to defend them both, and they knocked him to the ground.

“Riku!” Before consciously deciding to do so, Sora was running to his side, interrupted by a red flash swiftly coming to rest at his throat—one of Xemnas’s swords, the Ethereal Blades. There was no move he could make, and above his head, the other blade glinted.

Sora stiffened, expecting a terrible blow, but then—Riku was on his feet. He shoved Sora out of range.

“Riku...!” Sora cried. In saving him, Riku had taken a direct hit from the Ethereal Blades to his own back.

“Sora!” he called.

Sora leaped in his direction, and as he passed close, Riku handed off Way to the Dawn—his own Keyblade.

With a Keyblade in each hand, Sora charged at Xemnas. “How about *this!*”

Xemnas was knocked aloft and flipped through the air.

“Riku!” Sora landed next to him and lifted Way to the Dawn. Riku’s hand closed around it—they both held it together.

And a beam of light burst from Way to the Dawn into the sky, into Xemnas, piercing through his chest.

Seeing the heavy damage, Sora and Riku leaped up in tandem to finish the battle, each bringing his Keyblade down on Xemnas. Both blows struck home.

“Cursed...Keyblades...!” Xemnas snarled. He stretched his hand out toward them, and his final roar faded out as if swallowed up by a world of silence.

At last, Xemnas wisped away into a spiraling mist of light and dark.

“This time we did it!” Sora jumped and grinned at Riku.

But Riku didn’t smile back. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Xemnas, who supposedly controlled the lesser Nobodies, was no more. And yet there were now swarms of Nobodies pouring in from the darkness around them, almost as if in mourning for their master.

“If we’re gonna get out of here, we’ll have to beat them!” Riku repositioned Way to the Dawn and charged into the swarm, with Sora close behind.

How many times have I taken down Nobodies like this? But I usually had Donald and Goofy with me... Oh, and sometimes Axel, too. But now I have Riku.

And if I’m fighting beside Riku, we’re going to be okay, Sora thought firmly.

They fought on and on, taking out Nobody after Nobody. There was no counting them, so they didn’t even try.

And as the last one vanished, Riku collapsed to his knees.

“Riku!” Sora dashed to him, crouching down in preparation to help him up, and peered into his face.

“Sora...I can’t...” Riku could scarcely catch his breath.

“No. Don’t say that!” Sora was deadly serious now, almost angry. “It’s not over. It’s just *not*.”

He took Riku’s arm and draped it over his shoulders to help him stand.

“How, Sora? Even if we could go on...look where we are...”

I can’t even walk under my own strength, Riku thought. *How can we both make it out of somewhere past the ends of all the worlds?*

“Aw, Riku, you’ve been hanging out in the darkness too long. Try and remember how to look on the bright side!” Sora gave him a cheerful smile and stared ahead.

There has to be a way out. I’m not giving up, Sora told himself. *I haven’t given up yet. I’m going back to the Destiny Islands with Riku.*

“Sora?” Riku said softly. The name of his best friend, who he was leaning on. Literally.

“Yeah?” Sora’s smile was still untroubled.

“You lead.” He looked ahead, too.

“Got it.” Sora nodded and started walking, dragging Riku along.

There was no way to know how far this shadowy nothingness went on. Riku felt like they would keep going forever and never find a way out.

But Sora just kept moving, focusing on the next step in front of him.

I don’t have that kind of strength, thought Riku. *If it was just me, I might have let myself waste away in here... But I want to get Sora home to our island.*

I want to go back to Kairi...

“Hey, Sora...”

“Hmm?”

Sora’s breath was already labored again, since he was basically carrying another person’s weight—which made Riku feel guilty. *If*

Sora was alone in here, he'd be able to go as far and as fast as he wanted.

"You know, I just...always figured I was better at stuff than you," Riku confessed.

He'd never told anybody that. Would it make Sora upset?

But Sora's response was not the bluster he expected. "Huh. Really?"

"You're not mad?"

Sora looked at him thoughtfully, about to say something important. "No. I kinda always thought you were better at everything, too."

Riku hung his head. That wasn't how he imagined Sora would feel.

He never would have been able to admit so easily that someone else was stronger. Well, not the way he was before.

Sora came to a halt then. Riku looked up at him curiously.

"Look—there's a light up ahead!" Sora exclaimed.

In the distance, they could just barely see something bright.

Sora moved faster toward the light.

And then it flooded over them... But it wasn't a way out after all.

The sound of waves reached their ears. They stood on a desolate shore.

On the faraway horizon was a weak, hazy glow, unidentifiable as either moonlight or twilight.

Sora had the faint sense he'd seen this place before. But he didn't know what it was.

"Dead end?" asked Riku, squinting at the bleak sea.

"Yup." Sora nodded.

There was no way to get Riku across that sea. So they couldn't go any farther. It was indeed a dead end.

"Let me down," said Riku. "I can walk."

Sora was a little skeptical, but he gently removed Riku's arm from around his shoulders. Riku teetered for a moment and then gained his footing properly on the sand. Sora let out a breath in relief—quietly, so Riku wouldn't hear—and walked up to the edge of the lapping waves.

He couldn't see any way out. He had no idea how to get off this lonely beach.

What could they do at this point?

The water here was dim and gray, nothing like their Destiny Islands. He could scarcely believe that it was the same thing—an ocean.

"You know..., " Sora mumbled, "maybe the darkness has gotten to

me, too.”

He wouldn't give up, no matter what happened. He would never abandon hope.

But now, his hope was faltering. He was so uncertain. What could they hold on to now?

He heard something behind him and turned to see Riku collapsed in the sand.

“Riku!” Sora dashed over to him, skidding as he crouched to anxiously check Riku's face.

“The way I am now, this is where I should be...” Riku lifted his head, sand stuck to his cheek. He stared out at the metal-dark sea. “If this is what the world truly is...maybe I should just fade back into darkness.”

I wanted to see other worlds, Riku remembered. I wanted to go somewhere else. And that wish has already come true.

Back then, on our island, I said to Sora and Kairi...

“It's just... I've always wondered why we're here, on this island. If there are other worlds out there, why did we end up on this one?”

Now I think it was because we had to be there to meet each other.

And if this really is the end of all the worlds, I don't mind fading out here.

“Riku...” Sora murmured his name.

“If the world is made of light and darkness...we can be the darkness.”

Although, to think that Sora would become part of the darkness—Sora, whose very existence was a brilliant light—it was a little sad.

Still, being in the dark along with Sora...that wasn't so bad. Riku wouldn't be lonesome at all.

Being here by himself would be horribly desolate. And he didn't want to be alone anymore.

Beside him, Sora looked at the sea and idly stretched his legs. “Yeah. The other side, the realm of light...it's safe now. Kairi and the king and the others are there.”

Even without us, the worlds will be okay, he thought as he gazed at the horizon. I don't mind becoming part of the darkness, if I'm with Riku.

“Right. That's what I mean. Hey, Sora... Could you help me? I want to go closer to the water.”

Sora got Riku's arm over his shoulders again and hoisted him up, then started walking, step by step. It felt like Riku could hardly move his legs anymore. *Is he really going to waste away here like this?*

“At least the waves sound the same,” said Riku.

Sora didn't reply. The ocean filled the silence between them, just

like at home. They sat down side by side on the slightly damp sand, and the waves lapped at their feet.

How many times had they watched the ocean together like this?

Blue sky, blue sea... Home lived only in their memories now.

How is Kairi doing...? Maybe she's sad that Riku and I disappeared.

The thought dampened Sora's spirits, too.

"What I said back there...about thinking I was better than you...," Riku began. "That wasn't all of it."

"Hmm?" Sora still faced the ocean as he listened to Riku.

"The truth is, Sora...I was jealous of you."

Then Sora looked at him. "What for?"

Riku hesitated over his words for a moment, staring out at the line between sky and sea. "I wished I could live life the way you do," he said after the pause. "Just following my heart."

Right—if he was being honest, he'd always, always envied Sora. That carefree laugh, the way he romped around with Kairi, his ability to face what was ahead unflinchingly. Riku had been jealous of all of it, all those things that simply didn't come to him naturally.

Sora turned back to the ocean. "Yeah, well. I've got my share of problems, too."

"Like what?"

"Like...wanting to be like you," Sora admitted quietly.

I always looked up to him. He was only a year older than me, only a little bit taller, but he was better at sword fighting, and he always looked cool, and I practically worshipped him. My best friend Riku.

The truth is, I wanted to be just like him.

"Really?" Riku looked up at Sora's confession, letting out a tiny laugh under his breath. His gaze rested on the silvery horizon. "Well, there is one big advantage to being me. Something you could never imitate."

"Wh... What do you mean?" asked Sora with a defensive pout.

Riku's words came easily this time. "Having you for a friend."

A bit bashful, Sora turned to the horizon again. "Then I guess... I'm okay the way I am. I've got something you could never imitate, too," he said, glad for it, and raised his eyes to the gloomy sky.

Riku has something I can never imitate. And he can never imitate what I have.

Somehow, that lifted his spirits.

They both gazed absently up at the starless heavens. There was no telling what time of day or night it might be here—they couldn't be sure what that light on the horizon was. The humid breeze from the ocean brought a hint of a chill.

And yet they felt completely content to be here—because they were together.

Sora quietly closed his eyes, and then Riku did, too.

They could almost pretend they were back at the beach on their island.

The sound of the waves... The ocean breeze.

Suddenly Riku opened his eyes again. A little glass bottle had settled at his feet, and inside, there seemed to be a letter.

He took out the cork stopper and scanned the letter. "Sora?"

"Huh?" Sora looked at him.

Riku held out the letter. "I think it's for you."

Sora took it and silently read it over.

Thinking of you, wherever you are...

We pray for our sorrows to end and hope that our hearts will blend. Now I will step forward to realize this wish.

And who knows... Starting a new journey may not be so hard. Or maybe it has already begun.

There are many worlds, but they share the same sky. One sky, one destiny.

The letter was signed *Kairi*.

"Light," Riku murmured.

A brilliant glow was pouring down in front of them. Light—enough light to drive away the darkness.

It was the world connected to Kairi's letter.

"The door to light..." Sora got to his feet. "We'll go together!"

He reached out his hand to Riku.

"Yeah."

As they stepped forward together, the warm light enfolded them.

The bronze sun was just about to sink into the sea beyond Destiny Island.

Kairi gazed at the water.

The twilight hour—between day and night, between light and darkness—when the rays of the sun stretched out long between the sky and the sea, turned the world to indistinct shapes of deep blue.

Xemnas had to be defeated by now...but Riku and Sora weren't home.

Kairi and King Mickey, along with Donald and Goofy, had made it here through the Corridors of Darkness, the way Naminé had told her to go.

But only them.

Sora and Riku were trapped in that strange world on the other

side.

Hey, Naminé... Are you here?

Kairi softly touched the place over her heart. She had a feeling that since Naminé had instructed her how to get through the Corridors of Darkness, maybe she could tell her something about how Sora and Riku were doing.

But there was no answer.

Staring at the sea, Kairi anxiously folded her hands in front of her chest.

"I bet they're all right," said the king from beside her.

"Your Majesty..."

He was watching the sea, too, and so were Donald and Goofy. All facing the same direction with the same wish in their hearts.

Sora, Riku... Please come home.

We're waiting for you here at the blue sea, under the clear sky.

If this wish reaches you... If you're somewhere out there under the same sky... I want you to know. We're waiting for you. And we'll keep waiting.

She could hear the soft rushing of the waves.

Kairi thought back to that day when she'd written a letter to the boy she couldn't quite remember.

She'd believed that letter would begin something. Why had she thought that?

It was someone she'd seen in a dream. It must have been Sora—no, Roxas?

"It starts with an S!"

"Starts with an S...", Kairi murmured. "Sora."

We made a promise. I know we did.

Two lights appeared—two shooting stars streaking across the sky. They grew brighter and trailed down into the sea, one after the other, as if reaching the end of a journey.

And where the stars fell, two faces broke the surface of the water.

They belonged to two boys very dear to her. The two she was waiting for.

"Sora! Riku!" Kairi waved to them.

Sora's grin was dazzling. He sloshed through the waves, running up out of the water. Riku followed him at a steady pace.

A smile came to Kairi's face in answer. Just before she could dash down to the water's edge, Donald and Goofy ran out ahead of her with King Mickey close behind them.

Goofy reached Sora first, tackling him in a hug, and Donald joined in, knocking Sora down into the waves. Goofy nuzzled against Sora's

cheek, Donald draped his arm around Sora's neck, and the water splashing around them sparkled like drops of sunlight.

King Mickey dodged the flailing trio and made a leap for Riku, who caught him in a hug and spun him around.

Kairi looked on, smiling ear to ear.

After hug-wrestling Sora for a decent amount of time, Donald and Goofy turned to her, beaming.

Sora eventually got up with a sheepish smile and took the thalassa shell charm out of his pocket, his fingers closed gently around it.

"I'm making them so even if one of us gets lost, we'll make it back here safe and sound. So the three of us will always be together."

"...We're back," Sora told her shyly.

"Welcome home." Kairi held out a hand to him.

He took her hand and held it tight.

EPILOGUE

YOU'RE HOME

MY EFFORTS THESE MANY YEARS HAVE COME TO FRUITION, with the world I govern having become a paradise worthy of the name Radiant Garden. Nurtured by the clear, sweet water that gives them life, fragrant flowers bloom in abundance, and the people meet each day with smiles full of hope.

But where there is light, darkness also lurks. As noted in my earlier reports, I must unravel the mystery of this “darkness in the heart.” The safety of this paradise depends on it.

I shall perform an experiment to probe the depths of a person’s heart. One of my six apprentices, Xehanort, has volunteered to be the subject.

The young man has served me ever since I found him at death’s door and nursed him back to health some years ago. At the time, he had lost all his memories, but he displayed a remarkable intellectual curiosity and readily absorbed my instruction, gaining profound knowledge. He wrestles with some emotional immaturity, but surely that is due to his young age.

If I explore Xehanort’s heart by means of psychological tests, I may be able to awaken the past locked away within. My apprentice Even, too, has shown great interest in Xehanort’s memories.

But is he really the best subject for this experiment?

Xehanort does indeed exhibit extraordinary talents... Too extraordinary.

Perhaps even superhuman.

I have made a terrible mistake.

No matter how good our intentions, we are not meant to meddle in the depths of another’s heart.

The fault is mine, and it has plunged me into despair.

A visitor from another world soothed my anguished soul.

A king, small in stature, came wielding a legendary key. He introduced himself as Mickey. And the key—yes, it was the fabled Keyblade, said to bring both chaos and prosperity to the world.

He was quite well-informed on many different things, and we spoke companionably, forming a fast friendship.

And now, I have had everything taken from me, banished to a hollow realm of nothingness.

What is Xehanort hoping to gain with a pilfered existence?

How long have I been here, exiled in this realm of nothingness?

Only by relying upon my anger and hatred have I been able to retain my sense of self, here in this void where all existence is negated.

But I cannot continue to idle away my time. What are Xehanort and the others attempting to do?

I must solve the riddles of the reports written in my stolen name. I must intercept my apprentices and defeat them. That is my mission—the only way to atone for what I’ve wrought on the worlds.

The key to it all must lie with the Heartless. The six traitors were operating a laboratory that churned out those cursed shadows.

The Heartless act only to fulfill their instinctive needs. They detect hearts with single-minded purpose and swarm around them. They would never obey a person’s commands; instead, the Heartless would easily take the would-be commander’s heart to increase their own ranks.

But what if it were an even stronger Heartless giving the orders?

As I suspected, Xehanort has become a Heartless. Using my name, he commanded other Heartless in quests to snatch away the hearts of many worlds. And from the core of the worlds’ hearts he has stolen Kingdom Hearts—he seeks to summon an unspeakably great darkness and return all things into its depths.

While pursuing the truth, I became acquainted with an unusual entity.

It is the soul and body left behind when a being loses its heart. When a Heartless is born, this entity disappears from the realm of light to be reborn as an entirely new being in another realm.

The heart is taken, and a Heartless is created; the body and soul remain, giving rise to a different entity. These possess different intentions than the Heartless, and while it is unclear what these sentient things are after, it would appear they are responsible for much havoc across the worlds.

My erstwhile friend the king, his retainers, and a Keyblade-wielding hero are battling the Heartless even as this new threat approaches.

And the new threat—they have given themselves a fitting name, I suppose.

Those who do not exist. The “Nobodies.”

It appears my betrayers have retained human shape as Nobodies and gathered more followers in hopes of advancing some new scheme.

This “Organization XIII,” formed of thirteen Nobodies with my

betrayers at its core, has split into two factions. They are said to be carrying out some kind of research.

To discover the organization's plans, I have decided to head to the place where six of its members are gathered. It towers over the far reaches of the realm between darkness and light—Castle Oblivion.

It consists of thirteen stories aboveground and twelve below, with the contents of its white rooms transforming in response to visitors' memories. Organization XIII was conducting experiments on memory here.

I was reunited with an old friend at Castle Oblivion but could not disclose my true identity. If he knew my situation, he would likely try to stop me from pursuing my revenge. Much as I would dearly like to converse with him as in days gone by...that is now but a hopeless dream.

My friend has been fighting in the realm of darkness. Most likely, he found his way there via Traverse Town. Like Castle Oblivion, that town also rests in the cleft between light and dark. It consists of the remnants of worlds whose hearts have been taken by the Heartless, and it is where those who managed to escape the destruction of their worlds eventually find themselves.

This realm between is considerably unstable, with Corridors of Darkness opening from time to time. I would surmise that when a world falls prey, some of the inhabitants arrive here through the corridors. Surely Sora traveled the same way when he first came to Traverse Town.

And tomorrow, Sora will awaken.

My long-awaited revenge nears its completion.

Xehanort stole everything from me. While his Heartless form is no more, as the leader of Organization XIII, his ambition once again is to capture Kingdom Hearts—the greatest of all hearts.

His Heartless attempted to draw out the great darkness of Kingdom Hearts, created from the hearts of the worlds he gathered; his Nobody, however, is now attempting to assimilate himself into Kingdom Hearts, which he created by poaching the hearts of so many.

That fool of an apprentice!

Only one mystery remains:

How did Xehanort manage to open the door that appeared in the basement of my castle...?

But no...it is useless to posit any theories now, when everything is so close to the conclusion.

King Mickey, my friend. I believe that in due course you will come across these records—my truthful accounts.

How I wish I could have spoken with you again when circumstances were better.

I have been a fool, obsessed with revenge. Forgive me.

Sora was alone in the cave, their secret spot. Their doodles still covered the walls. The sunlight of the Destiny Islands gently poured in from the opening in the ceiling. It was a quiet sanctuary with no sound but the distant waves.

And there was the drawing of Sora's and Kairi's faces on the back wall.

It felt like only days ago that he'd etched the image of his hand holding a paopu fruit up to Kairi's lips. And yet it felt like a hundred years ago that he'd first seen that man in the black cloak here.

The legend of the paopu fruit... *If two people share one, their destinies will become intertwined.* Something like that.

And then Sora noticed that someone else had added to the drawing. He brushed it with his fingertips.

Now it showed Kairi's hand, too, holding a paopu fruit up to Sora.

After a moment, he turned away and strode toward the mouth of the cave—then broke into a run.

Outside, Sora blinked in the dazzling sunlight, then ran to Riku, who was perched on the sideways trunk of a paopu tree.

The sky was blue, and so was the sea. The air was filled with the rush of the waves and the cries of birds. The sun was sinking ever closer to the sea.

It's real. This is Destiny Island. Our home.

"Nothing's changed, huh?" Riku said lazily.

"Nope. Nothing will." Sora nodded.

"Such a tiny world."

"But it's part of something much bigger." Watching the sunset, Sora crinkled his eyes. *This tiny world... This little island. I wanted so badly to come home to this place.*

"Yeah..." Riku sighed. The sun drifted lower and lower.

Then Sora suddenly turned to him. "Hey, Riku... What do you think it was? The door to the light?"

Riku hopped down from the trunk with a hint of a smile and looked back at Sora. "This." He pointed to Sora's heart.

"This?" Sora examined his own chest.

"Yeah. It's always closer than you think."

Just as a grin spread across Sora's face, they heard Kairi calling.

"Sora! Riku!"

She sprinted down the beach to them, a small glass bottle in her hand.

"What's up?" said Sora.

"Look!" She'd been clutching the bottle to her chest, making sure

not to drop it, and now she held it out to them.

A piece of paper was rolled up inside—and in the middle, it bore King Mickey's seal.

"It's from the king?!" Sora hurried to pop out the cork and shake the letter free, then started reading right away.

Riku smiled as he read it in turn. Kairi examined it anxiously.

The setting sun shone gold on their faces.

—THE END—

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